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08

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Sony's STR-DA5800ES,
reviewed on p42



WELCOME

I was interested this month to see Arcam announcing its return to the high-end AVR market, after a four-year hiatus during which the UK brand focused heavily on its well-received 'r' series of music peripherals – particularly when Arcam's MD told us that the intervening years had witnessed a 'race to the bottom', with rivals targeting features over performance. That's bound to ruffle a few feathers...

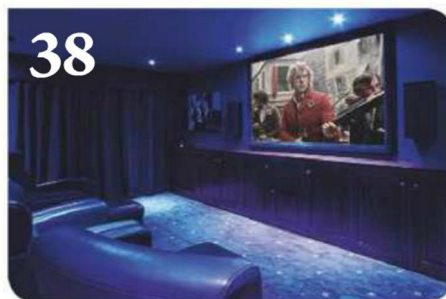
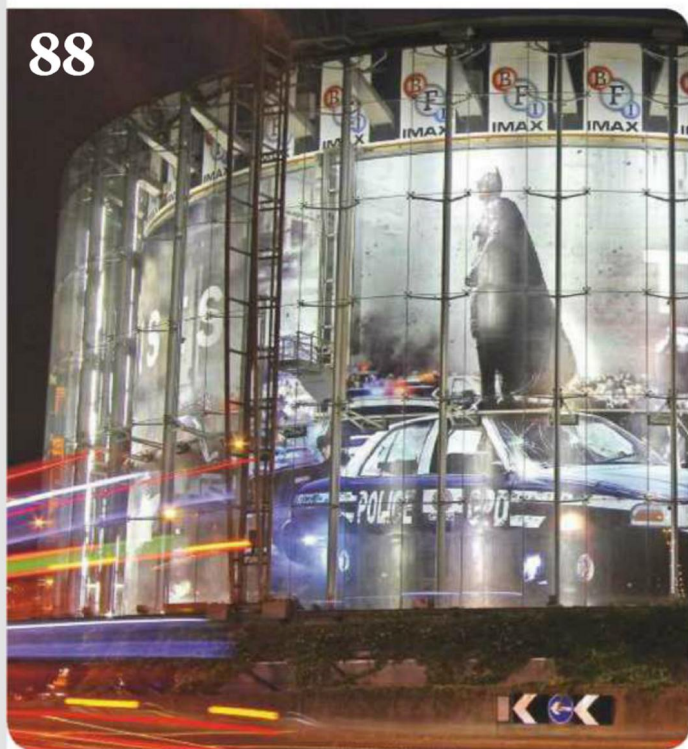


While we can't wait to wrap our ears around Arcam's forthcoming AVR750, I will defend the other brands that have recently carried the AV can. **For many consumers, a hefty feature-set is an important part of their receiver's appeal**, and models like Sony's STR-DA5800ES, reviewed on p42, or Onkyo's TX-NR626 (p62) are nothing if not well-specified. Home networking, virtual channels, post-processing modes, app control – these all have their place. Do we still care about performance, though? Oh yes.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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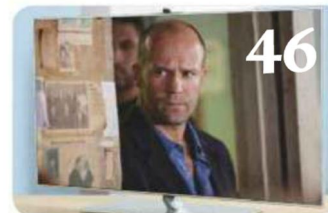
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BE MOVED

www.sony.co.uk/receiver



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BULLETIN

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ARCAM The secrets behind the British brand's 'best-ever' AV receiver **HOME TECHNOLOGY SHOWCASE**
 The coolest kit from the custom install show **DOCTOR WHO** Restoring vintage story *The Mind of Evil* to full colour for its DVD debut **SPRING BREAKERS** Good girls turn bad on BD and DVD **AND MUCH MORE!**

X marks the spot

Denon AVR-X4000 → www.denon.co.uk



Meet the crown jewel in Denon's new X Series AV receiver range. Available in a choice of black or 'premium silver' finishes, the £1,200 AVR-X4000 claims seven channels of 200W amplification, seven HDMI inputs, three HDMI outputs and 4K upscaling and passthrough. It also offers a suite of streaming options, including Apple AirPlay and Bluetooth connectivity as well as support for online music services like Spotify and Last.fm. Eleven speaker terminals enable various height/width/Zone 2 configurations.

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

Back in black

Xbox One → www.xbox.com



Microsoft has taken the wraps off its long-awaited next-gen console, the Xbox One. And, while it may look like a throwback to the original Xbox with its rather austere black finish, this 'ultimate all-in-one entertainment system' is as much about home cinema as it is about videogames. Not only does it finally offer Blu-ray playback, Microsoft also

made a big play of the device's Live TV and EPG functionality at the launch event – although exactly what form this will take outside of the US remains to be seen. Key to the user experience is an upgraded version of Kinect, allowing you to almost instantly switch between films, TV and games. Expect it to hit the UK in November, priced around £430.

Smart TV on a budget



Direct-to-consumer CE manufacturer and retailer Kogan has set out to bring the world of Smart TV to an even

larger audience with its latest low-cost 32in model. Priced around £260, the 720p Agora Smart LED TV employs the Android 4.0 platform to allow users to check emails, browse the 'net and make use of the expanding selection of apps available through the Google Play store. The Agora Smart TV also features an integrated HD tuner, PVR functionality, two HDMI inputs and three USB inputs.
www.kogan.com/uk

BAR3 adds Bluetooth



Having been rather impressed with Roth Audio's previous soundbars, we were happy to discover that

the sound specialist has yet another model on the way this July. The major selling point of the £250 Roth BAR3 is the inclusion of Bluetooth functionality, allowing you to wirelessly stream content from mobile devices. Behind the BAR3's grille sit four mid-range drivers and two high-frequency tweeters – extra sonic muscle is provided by a wireless 100W subwoofer.
www.rothaudio.co.uk

Onkyo expands range



Onkyo has added two new models to the upper echelons of its

mid-range AVR line-up. The 9.2-channel TX-NR929 (pictured) will set you back around £1,500, while the 7.2-channel TX-NR828 retails for £1,000. In addition to built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth capabilities, both models also boast 4K passthrough and upscaling, as well as THX Select2 Plus certification. The TX-NR929 also offers 11.2 multichannel pre-outs with DTS Neo:X upmixing and has an extra HDMI for sending HD video to a second display.
www.uk.onkyo.com

Arcam returns to the high-end

Company believes a 4K-led resurgence in home cinema is on the cards

UK hi-fi hero Arcam is refocusing its home cinema attention at the higher end of the AV market, following the launch of the new £4,000 AVR750 home cinema receiver, and believes that a renaissance in high-end home theatre could follow the introduction of 4K TVs.

Speaking to HCC, Arcam managing director Charlie Brennan said: 'We think we've missed a trick in selling performance. What we've seen in the home theatre AVR market over the past few years is a race to the bottom, with brands putting more and more spec into their boxes as they go down in price. It's amazing what these receivers can do for the money, but audio performance is definitely suffering.'

What Arcam wants to do now, he claims, is pursue a high-performance agenda – with the new AVR750 AV receiver leading the way. 'We see the AVR750 as an evolution of the AVR600, which we firmly believe has been the finest-sounding home cinema receiver in the world,' he told us.

Brennan also confides that the company is working on a pre/power combo based on the



Charlie Brennan: 'What we've seen in the AVR market is a race to the bottom... audio performance is definitely suffering'

AVR750 for launch later this year. The new two-piece will be officially unveiled at CEDIA Expo in Denver this Autumn. 'It's time to re-engage with the custom install market,' he explained.

Getting back to basics

Arcam has long worn its technological evangelism on its sleeve, but the market hasn't been kind. The company invested huge sums into developing Blu-ray, was an early media server advocate and went big with DAB. However, it now appears that the time has come to get back to basics.

'We've been asking ourselves where our real expertise lies, where can we add value – and it's with audio and video engineering.' High-end audio components are 'not just about resolution. They're about the art that comes with 40 years of audio engineering experience. And when we offer higher performance electronics, customers can get more out of their higher performance loudspeakers...'

The company also believes that the arrival of 4K displays this Summer will provide a fresh fillip for the market. 'People who bought an early home cinema projector or a Pioneer Kuro are probably ready to upgrade to a 4K display device about now,' states Brennan. 'And the first-generation screens are already shaping up to be much less expensive than we first thought they might be.'

The AVR750 demonstrates Arcam's renewed focus on the high-end



PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Django Unchained (All-region BD)

Tarantino reins in the worst excesses of *Inglourious Basterds* and in the process comes up with his funniest and most visually spectacular film to date



Black Sabbath (Region B BD/R2 DVD)



Mario Bava's lurid horror anthology has been lovingly restored to its full glory for Arrow's all-encompassing dual-format release

Life of Pi 3D (Region A/B BD)



Its mix of breathtaking visuals and flawless stereoscopic presentation make this Blu-ray a must-own for anyone with a 3D-capable system

Parks and Recreation (BBC Four)



It's taken four years for this hit US sitcom to cross the Atlantic. Still, better late than never...

BioShock Infinite (Xbox360/PS3/PC)



A landmark game that continues to reveal fresh surprises and extra layers with every replay

LOADING...

Team HCC's pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

Dead and loving it



StudioCanal has confirmed that Fede Alvarez's blood-splattered remake of *The Evil Dead* will

be hitting DVD and Blu-ray in the UK on August 12. Details are rather thin on the ground at the moment, but if it's anything like the US release fans can look forward to an audio commentary by the director and cast, alongside five behind-the-scene featurettes.

Giant-sized action



Jack the Giant Slayer, Bryan Singer's first foray into the world of 3D blockbusters, will be crashing its way onto DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray on July 15. Extras on the two hi-def releases look set to include eight *Become a Giant Slayer* featurettes, a deleted scene and a gag reel.

Boyle-ing point



The line between fantasy and reality is put to the test in *Trance*, a noir-esque thriller from award-winning director (and London 2012 opening ceremony mastermind) Danny Boyle. Keep an eye out for the brain-twisting flick when it hits BD and DVD in the UK on August 5.

CI enjoys a day at the races

Home Technology Showcase proves a platform for front-running AV

The custom install industry descended on Epsom Racecourse recently to bet on the future of AV. The inaugural Home Technology Showcase drew hundreds of dealers eager to take a punt on the latest home cinema hardware, and from wet-room TVs and Ultra HD to intelligent remote controllers, there was plenty to nag about.

Amongst the various kit unveiled was a new line of HDMI accessories from CI signal distribution specialists Wyrestorm. The brand's incoming Express line will encompass a range of HDMI switchers and system accessories aimed squarely at AV enthusiasts. Landing this July are 3-to-1 and 5-to-1 HDMI switchers. 'Going forward we're looking to add cables, DACs, analogue-to-digital converters and in-line repeaters,' said general manager Adrian Ickeringill. For high-end home cinema installations, Wyrestorm also introduced new 4K-compatible HDBaseT HDMI signal extenders plus a rack-mount matrix switcher that installers can customise to order using an online configurator.

Also out to change perceptions was Aquavision. The company has built an enviable reputation for waterproof screens, but is now hoping to escape the bathroom. 'The fact is our new on-wall TV screens can be used anywhere,' insisted company director Alistair Benn. 'We recently supplied large screens to a boardroom simply because the customer liked the look of them. They're very swish.'

Aiding app control

During the two-day event, universal remote control brand RTI also introduced its innovative SURFIR RF remote controller, designed as a companion zapper



Steve Beahan: 'Putting on the Home Technology Showcase was a leap of faith, but it's proved very successful'

to Android or iOS control apps. 'The biggest issue with control through smartphones and tablet devices is if you want to use your mobile device to momentarily launch another app, maybe to check something on the web, you temporarily lose the ability to do something as simple as turn down the volume on the TV,' explained Pete Baker, RTI's VP of sales and marketing. 'The SURFIR links to your mobile device and maintains control of what you're watching, should you want to use your mobile to do something else. It dynamically tracks whatever device you're controlling on the second device. It's a pretty revolutionary solution.'

Organiser Steve Beahan, MD of distributor Invision UK, told HCC that the show had been so successful that more are definitely on the cards: 'We're looking at venues for a northern show to be held in September.'



Adrian Ickeringill demonstrates Wyrestorm's latest kit (below)

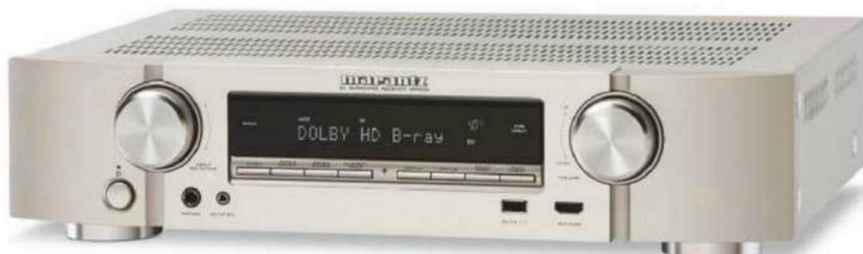
Marantz ships two new slim-line AVR's

Duo offer advanced network capabilities for space-conscious AV enthusiasts

Audio technology manufacturer Marantz has introduced two new super-slim AV receivers as part of its ongoing 60th anniversary celebrations.

Promising to 'pack the same punch as their bigger

The two new slim-line AVR's support various digital file formats including ALAC and FLAC 192kHz/24-bit



brothers', the £400 NR1504 claims 85W across each of its five channels, while the £550 NR1604 (pictured) ups this to 90W across seven channels.

Streaming sound

Like many of their current rivals, Marantz's new super-skinny duo also put plenty of weight behind their network music capabilities; DLNA compliance and built-in AirPlay technology allows users to access their library of digital tunes, and format support includes FLAC, ALAC and WAV. And in terms of ease-of-use, the brand says the GUI and setup wizard mean there is 'no reason to study the manual'.



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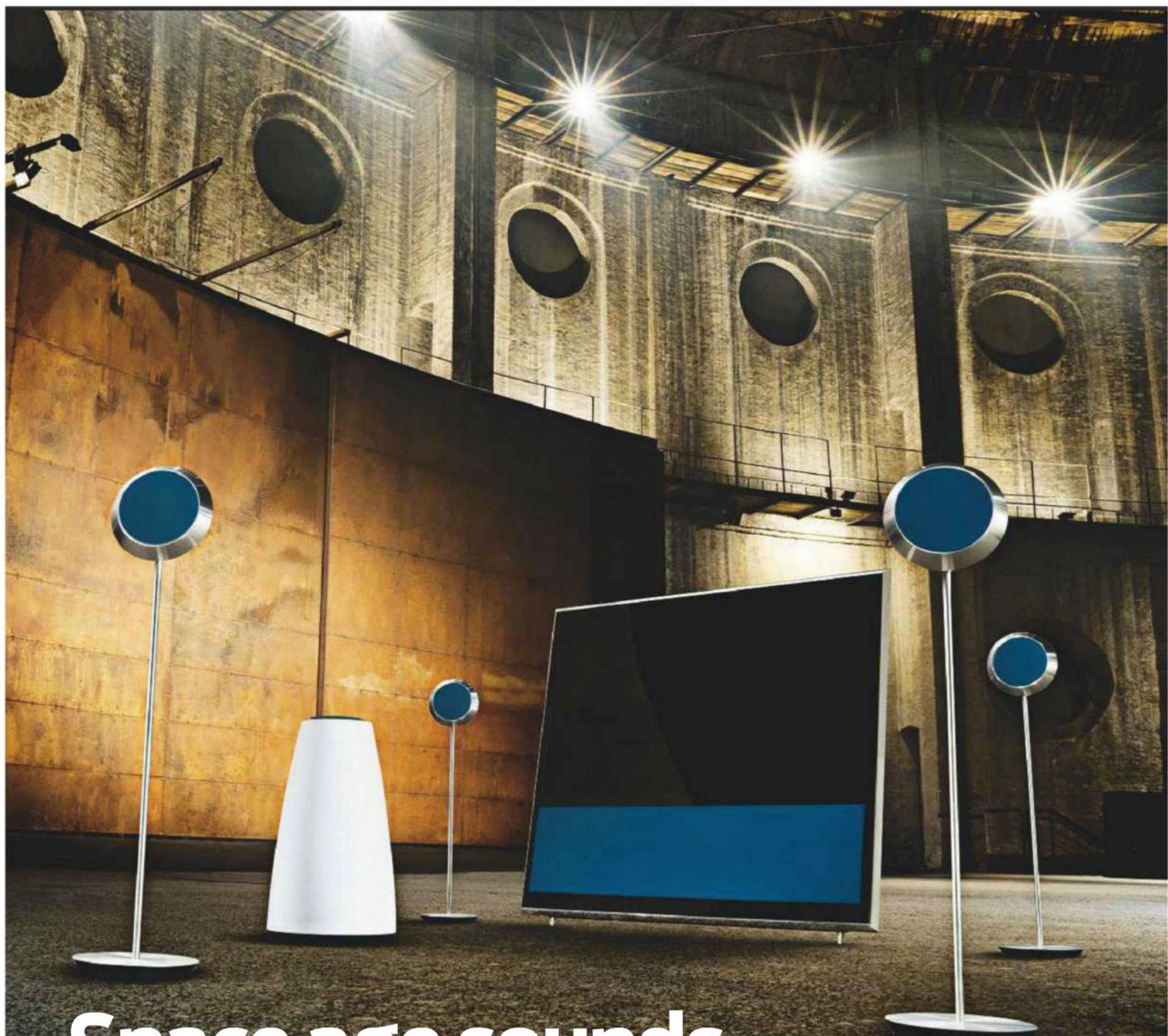
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Space age sounds

Bang & Olufsen BeoLab 14 → www.bang-olufsen.com

From its spindly satellites to the urn-like 280W subwoofer that screams *Prometheus*, there's definitely a touch of sci-fi styling about Bang & Olufsen's latest home cinema speaker system. The BeoLab 14's sub claims to drop as deep as 26Hz and features an 8in downward-firing driver – it also houses five individual 140W amplifiers for the surround speakers. These satellites incorporate 2.5in treble/midrange drivers within their 6.3in-diameter milled aluminium cabinets. The BeoLab 14 system is available as both a 4.1 array for use with B&O TVs (£2,500) and a full 5.1 lineup (£2,800).

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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ JUNE

28: CEDIA Region 1 Awards

The UK's custom install industry will be downing tools and putting on their poshest togs to attend this awards ceremony celebrating the very best in the business. <http://awards.cedia.co.uk>

→ JULY

01: Stoker

OldBoy director Park Chan-wook makes the jump to Hollywood with this ultra-creepy Hitchcockian thriller. Grab it on DVD and Blu-ray. www.fox.co.uk

08: Falling Skies: Season Two

The second season of the Steven Spielberg-produced alien invasion series arrives on DVD and Blu-ray today. A double-pack of Seasons One and Two also hits shelves. www.warnerbros.co.uk

12: Pacific Rim

Guillermo del Toro's love letter to the classic Godzilla movies stomps into UK cinemas. If you're anything like Team HCC and can't

get enough of watching big robots fighting even bigger monsters, then this is the blockbuster for you. www.warnerbros.co.uk

15: Runaway Train

Arrow Video works its restoration magic with the UK Blu-ray premiere of this cult 1985 thriller based on a screenplay by Akira Kurosawa. www.arrowfilms.co.uk

19: The World's End

The final part of Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's 'Three Flavours Cornetto trilogy' arrives in UK cinemas. The film follows a group of friends embarking on an epic pub crawl during an alien invasion. www.universalpictures.co.uk

03: G.I. Joe Retaliation

Want to play toy soldiers with The Rock and Bruce Willis? Well, you can't. But this explosive sequel based on the popular action figure range is the next best thing. Track it down on DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray. www.paramountpictures.co.uk

25: HCC #224

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

INTERVIEW

Doctoring the Doctor

Peter Crocker, Video Restoration Specialist, SVS Resources, tells *HCC* about the process of bringing colour back to a classic *Doctor Who* serial

How did it come to pass that episodes from so many classic TV series, including *Doctor Who*, have been wiped by the BBC?

'Until 1978, the BBC had no co-ordinated archive policy. There was the film library – whose *raison d'être* was to provide film clips to programme makers – and the engineering department, which controlled VT (video tape). The storage of complete programmes for posterity was a lesser concern.

'As VT was viewed as a very expensive means to pre-record programmes and facilitate editing, rather than a long-term archiving medium, as much tape as possible was recycled. This meant that once the initial broadcast rights expired the tapes would be wiped in order for a new show to be recorded on them.'

So where did the existing black-and-white copy of *The Mind of Evil* come from?

'Because *Doctor Who* was sold abroad to other countries that didn't have colour TV at the time, BBC Enterprises had black-and-white 16mm film recordings made. Simplistically, these were done by pointing a film camera at a TV screen – although in reality the recording apparatus was very sophisticated, producing some very high quality results.

'When the BBC archive was finally established 1978, much of the VT containing Jon Pertwee's tenure on *Doctor Who* had been wiped, including all six episodes of *The Mind of Evil*. Fortunately, BBC Enterprises still had the 16mm film negatives from its off-screen recordings of this colour serial, albeit in monochrome.'

When was the decision made to recolour the serial for DVD?

'It has always been the aim of those working on the restorations of *Doctor Who* for DVD that every



episode originally shot in colour should be returned to that form. We just had to wait for technology and restoration techniques to develop to allow it to happen. It was as late as 2011 that we were finally confident that all six episodes of *The Mind of Evil* could be released in colour.'

Can you explain the processes used to recolour the episodes?

'Episodes two to six had the 4.43MHz PAL subcarrier signal embedded in the picture as recorded to 16mm film. This appears as a pattern of very fine dots on the image which increase in size and density in areas of strong colour. This subcarrier signal opens the possibility of the Colour Recovery process being employed to remove the dots and add the colour.

'However, the results of Colour Recovery can vary wildly. In this instance, episode two suffered from cyclical variation in colour saturation from around 30 per cent to 200 per cent of the correct level. This was nigh on impossible to fix in 2009, but by 2012 more sophisticated software allowed us to smooth out the worst issues.

'A bigger problem was that the subcarrier signal had been filtered out of episode one before the film recording was made – so the only

The benefit of the recolourisation is clear to see in this split-screen shot

option was manual colourisation. This had been done back in 2008 for the third episode of *Planet of the Daleks* by Legend Films in the US, but – for a variety of reasons including unfavourable exchange rates – this was no longer an economically viable option.'

How did you get around that?

'I'd seen some projects by Stuart Humphries (aka YouTube's Babelcolour) – colourising stills and short video clips – and, like many others, was very impressed by the quality. Skin tones and hair colour is rarely done well, even by professional companies, but Stuart seemed to have nailed it.

'When I approached him, he engaged enthusiastically with the project and tirelessly devoted most of his spare time for 18 months to it, producing colour keyframes in astonishingly realistic detail. I don't think he should ever have to buy a pint of beer again if a *Doctor Who* fan is around. Without him the quality of the episode would have been immeasurably poorer.'

Doctor Who: The Mind of Evil is available to buy now on DVD and is reviewed on p100

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 DALI adds artistic flair
As part of its 30th anniversary celebrations, DALI is introducing a limited edition range of its award-winning FAZON F5 speakers. Priced around £3,450 per pair and hand-decorated by some of the world's finest airbrush artists, DALI claims that these special speakers 'offer an eye-striking and ear-blowing experience.'

2 Virgin expands TV Anywhere
Corrie fans can relax – Virgin Media has added ITV 1, plus 10 other channels, to its TV Anywhere cloud-based streaming service, bringing the total number of live and on-demand channels to 75.

3 Sony eyes up Eye IO's 4K tech
US company Eye IO has licensed its 4K compression technology to Sony to help the manufacturer deliver 4K content to the home. Sony's first use of the tech – which is designed to compress and encode 4K content in a more manageable format – will be in the media players included with its Ultra HD 4K TVs in the US this Summer.

4 Smart TV still not connecting
New information released by research firm Analysys Mason claims that fewer than half of all Smart TVs in homes are actually connected to the internet. Conducted last October, the survey features responses from 6,610 consumers in France, Germany, Poland, Spain, the UK and the US. Age seems to play a key part in the equation – 50 per cent of respondents aged between 18 and 34 have networked their Smart TVs, with the figure dropping to 32 per cent for users over the age of 55.

5 Wicker Man appeal
To mark the 40th anniversary of the British horror classic *The Wicker Man*, UK distributor StudioCanal has joined forces with director Robin Hardy to launch a worldwide appeal asking film collectors, historians and fans to come forward with any information relating to the whereabouts of the film's legendary missing footage. For more info visit www.facebook.com/WickerManAppeal.

6 BBC iPlayer to add radio downloads next year
The BBC Trust has finally given its approval for radio downloads to be made available via BBC iPlayer. Starting in 2014, the proposal will allow users to download radio shows for up to seven days after broadcast and will give them a 30-day window to 'open it', with a further seven-day window to listen to it after being 'opened'.

7 Amazon primes five original TV shows
Amazon has announced the five original series that will air exclusively on its Prime Instant Video service in the coming year. Based on consumer feedback to a series of ideas pitched by the service, they include political comedy *Alpha House* starring John Goodman and the Ed Begley Jr. social network start-up sitcom *Betas*, alongside a trio of kids' shows.

8 Sharp makes record loss...
For the second year running Sharp has posted a record loss. The company has confirmed a mammoth net loss of just over ¥545 billion (roughly £3.6 billion) for the year ending March 2013. Yikes.

9 ...but Sony is back in profit
The recent sale of its US HQ in New York and its Sony City Osaki building in Tokyo have helped Japanese tech giant Sony return to profit for the first time in five years. The company announced a ¥43bn (£280m) net profit for the financial year ending March 2013, up from a ¥457bn loss the previous year.

10 AWE takes pole position
Epsom-based custom installation distributor AWE Europe has announced a new tie-up with the Sahara Force India Formula One Team. The partnership includes the installation of advanced control and AV equipment – including URC controls, Philips LED lighting, KEF loudspeakers and Panasonic projectors – in the team's Silverstone boardroom.

The Force India F1 team's HQ



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Closer to the action

The latest rumour surrounding Marvel Studios' *Guardians of the Galaxy* is that Glenn Close has been signed up to play the leader of the Nova Corps. What next? Daniel Day-Lewis playing Rocket Raccoon?

Mendes back for Bond?



Sam Mendes may be returning to the world of 007 after all. The *Skyfall* director originally declined an offer to helm the next film in order to focus on theatre projects. However, the latest word is that the Bond producers are now willing to put the film on hold in order to accommodate Mendes' schedule.

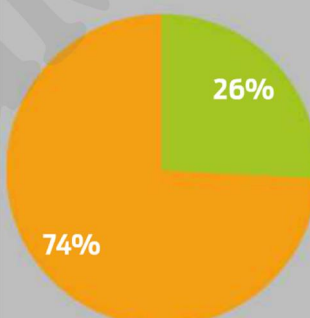
Call the lawyers...

Trouble is brewing in the world of superheroes. Both Marvel Studios and 20th Century Fox are planning to feature the superhero Quicksilver in upcoming films – with both studios claiming that they own the rights to the super-speedy mutant. This is one superhero brawl that will have to be settled in a court of law...

WE ASKED...

Are you excited about the idea of curved OLED screens for the home?

■ Yes!
■ No!



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Girl power

Spring Breakers → Universal Pictures → All-region BD/R2 DVD

Former Disney starlets Selena Gomez and Vanessa Hudgens try their hand at something a little more grown-up in this psychedelic, censor-baiting teen movie – the duo join Ashley Benson and Rachel Korine as a quartet of college friends who get caught up in

a tale of sex, drugs and violence over Spring Break weekend. Universal has yet to confirm what extras will be on the UK Blu-ray when it lands in shops on August 12, but we're hoping cult director Harmony Korine's eye-searing visuals brush up well in Full HD.

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Disney's fantastical adventure *Oz the Great and Powerful*, from the director of the *Spider-Man* trilogy, reveals the origin of the man who will one day become known as the Wizard of Oz.

When smalltown magician Oscar Diggs (James Franco) is whisked away to the vibrant land of Oz he thinks he's hit the jackpot – until he meets three witches (Mila Kunis, Rachel Weisz

and Michelle Williams) who aren't convinced he's the powerful wizard destined to save Oz from the forces of evil.

Packed with eye-popping action and special effects, Walt Disney Home Entertainment's *Oz the Great and Powerful* Blu-ray conjures up a bewitching mix of 1080p imagery and 7.1-channel sonics that will bring out the best in your home cinema system.

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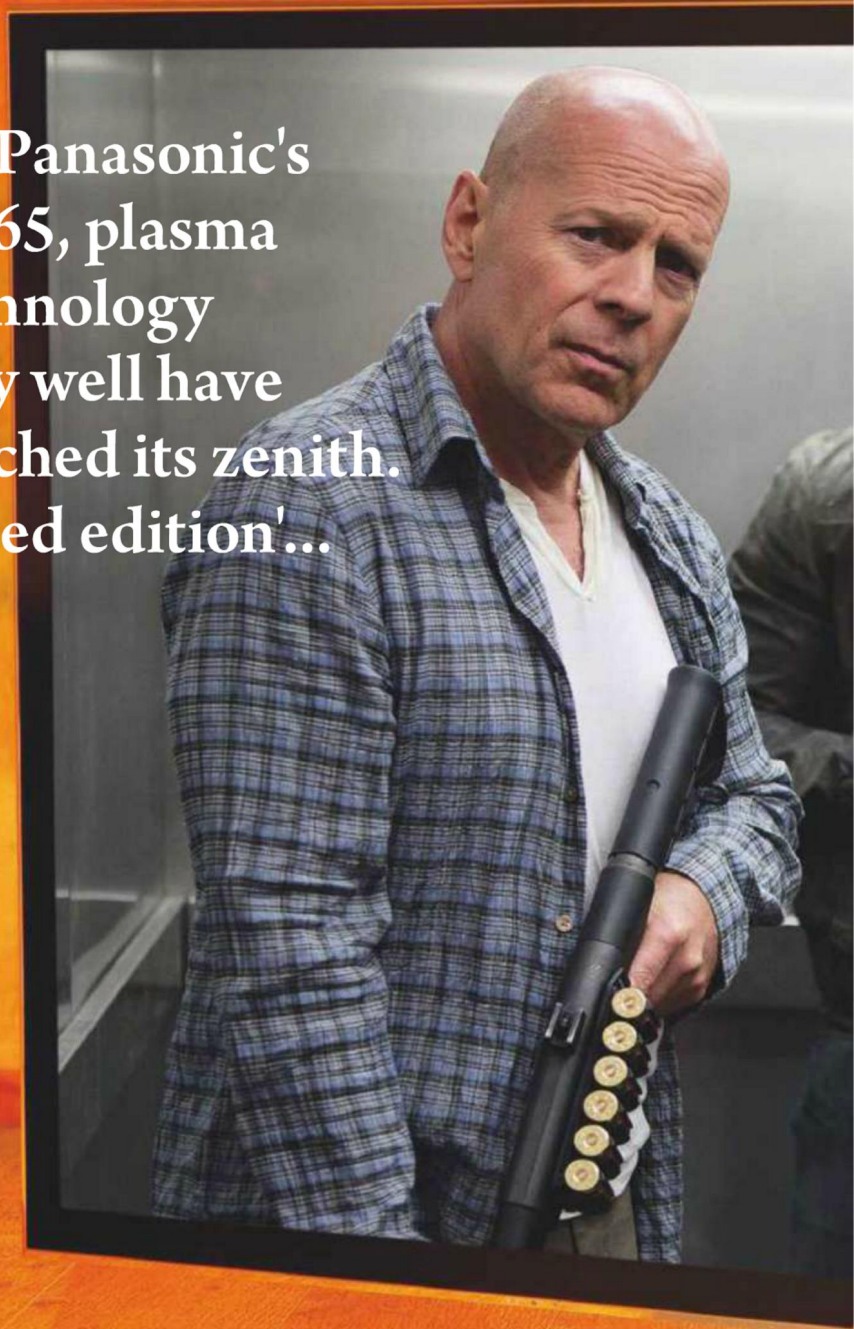
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With Panasonic's ZT65, plasma technology may well have reached its zenith. If only it wasn't a 'limited edition'...

THE PANASONIC TX-P60ZT65 casts a longer shadow than its slender frame might suggest. It is, says its creators, the final word in plasma panel development. The most advanced PDP design to roll off Panasonic's production line, albeit in limited quantities, the brand says it simply can't take the technology further in any way than makes economic sense. So what we have here is the culmination of years of development, with a lineage that can be traced back through both Panasonic and Pioneer. The result is, quite simply, the best Full HD image you can buy today.

Let's dwell on that observation for just a few minutes: the ZT65 delivers unquestionably, unreservedly, undeniably the best 1080p picture in town. Its images are astonishingly crisp, yet without processing artifice, offering more subtle gradation than anything that has gone before. Panasonic says this Ultimate Black panel is capable of 30,720 steps of gradation, thanks to its fastest-ever subfield driver. This translates to a photographic authenticity to its presentation that's beguiling. When the TV powers up, it fleetingly flashes 'Studio >





ACTION STATIONS

The fifth *Die Hard* movie prepares to blow you away on BD, p98

Panasonic



Plasma fan and animal lover **Steve May** has always wanted a black cat called Kuro. Now all he wants is a black cat called TX-P60ZT65





The ZT65's new panel eliminates the traditional air gap to help reduce reflections

Master Panel' as a knowing proclamation that you're about to see something rather special, and then it delivers exactly that.

Of course, there's much more to today's TV proposition than just picture quality, and this set comes with all manner of extra gizmology. For example, there's a Bluetooth electronic pen which allows you to doodle and leave messages on the panel itself. Such innovation is, of course, anathema to any enthusiast, only more so on a panel like the ZT65. Indeed, the user guide itself warns

against applying too much pressure with the pen. The sensible thing to do is to immediately squirrel this e-pen away at the back of the cable draw and forget about it.

The voice of the future

Smart functionality on this premium plasma is high; beneath the lid, a multi-core processor makes everything swift to navigate. The set also utilises voice recognition, powered by Nuance Communication's Dragon software. You can use conversational commands for

a variety of control and search functions, such as changing the channel or volume, or conducting a web search for a particular actor or show. The set also has a tendency to speak at the drop of a hat, even inviting you to take a narrated tour of its many features and functions during setup.

Cosmetically, the ZT65 looks gorgeous; the glass and metal design is classic minimalist chic. Nothing disturbs its clean lines, not even a pop-out HD camera for Skype calling, as found lower down the ranks. The high-necked

pedestal stand is distinctive, although it necessitates using cable ties to hide connection spaghetti.

There are three side-facing HDMI, Scart and component/AV (adaptors supplied), three USBs, Ethernet, a digital audio output, headphone jack and CI slot. Wi-Fi is built in and there's an SD card slot for JPEG playback. The latter plays back with lounge music seemingly recorded down a telephone line.

'Panasonic's ZT65 looks gorgeous – the glass and metal design is classic, minimalist chic'

The set has twin Freeview HD and Freesat tuners, which significantly impacts the way it can be used. Recording to a USB hard drive becomes a given, rather than a curiosity, as you no longer relinquish control of channels to make the recording. You can also stream to a connected mobile device, aka Watch & Share, as well as enjoy simultaneous channel action within the user interface with Fast Zapping, a bespoke vertical POP (picture outside picture) programme listing.

The now-familiar My Home Screen is a default part of the user experience. Ostensibly this allows various family members to create their own homepage environment, but from a practical point of view, it also means you can launch the set with quick access to media and network content playback, Catch-up TV services, Netflix and YouTube. Smart functionality extends to screen mirroring for mobile devices running Panasonic's app, utilising Miracast.

Media playback from USB is excellent. MKV, WMV, MPG, AAC, FLAC, MP3 and WMA all proved accessible. When asked to access the same across a network, the set becomes flummoxed by MKVs and AVIs, which is a tad limiting.

The screen ships with two controllers, a Bluetooth touchpad and an IR remote. The latter isn't an off-the-shelf, plastic cheapie, but a hefty, well-finished wand, while the former takes a little bit of getting used to and is designed for better navigating the brand's online portal.

Deep thought required

As befits a panel very much aimed at enthusiasts, there's some deep calibration on offer here, with modes designed to satisfy the most obsessive videophiles. However, not all options serve the set well.

One processing mode best defeated is IFC (Intelligent Frame Creation), which adds high-frame rate smoothness to the image,

along with incrementally unwanted motion artefacts. This 3,000Hz FFD (Focused Field Drive) panel is natively fast enough to retain Full HD clarity with movements (measured at 6.5 pixels per frame), so IFC is of little practical use. Last year's fastest NeoPlasma was rated at 2,500Hz FFD, so this is a significant step up. The faster drive means that the light emission period has been shortened; subfields are virtually packed into 1/3000th of a second, compared to last year's 1/2500th of a second. There's no afterglow, which keeps images crisp and smear-free. If you do want additional image stability with horizontal pans, then opt for the Minimum IFC setting.

One of the screen's more astonishing traits is the level of shadow detail held in even the inkiest of black scenes. Here, dark fabrics that can block solid on screens which crush blacks for higher contrast reveal deep, subtle textures without sacrificing overall blackness. This gives images incredible depth. Colour vibrancy is also outstanding. The panel employs a new pure red phosphor and is able to display 98 per cent of the DCI specification. The set also incorporates Pure Direct and Pixel direct colour processing to claim improved vibrancy.



Two remotes: the standard zapper is weightier than usual

Top-notch THX

Of the various pro-style presets, I felt THX the best. It has more snap and dynamics than regular Cinema mode with no overscan by default. The set is also the first I've seen to feature an EBU default mode. This complies with the Tech 3321 directive drafted in 2007 by the European Broadcast Union, for consumer displays to 'adequately reflect the creative values intended by the programme director.' It optimises the display for luminance, black level, contrast, gamma, colour and frame-rate, and is an interesting alternative to THX. I suspect many users will actually find the setting too dark, because its heavy gamma burden relies on blacked-out viewing conditions to work well. And even then I'll wager you'll struggle to pull detail from the shadows at normal viewing distances.

Panasonic's 2013 Hexa image processing platform services a multiplicity of modes and presets, including Pro modes which have a REC 709 default colour space. The Custom preset also opens up an entire dungeon of correction, including the ability to alter panel luminance, variable between Low, Mid, High. The Low setting is my preferred option, as the other settings invite sparkling pixel noise in blacks. While this isn't actually visible for the most part from a normal seating position, it could prove distracting. The panel also



Pioneer Kuro: Master of the dark arts

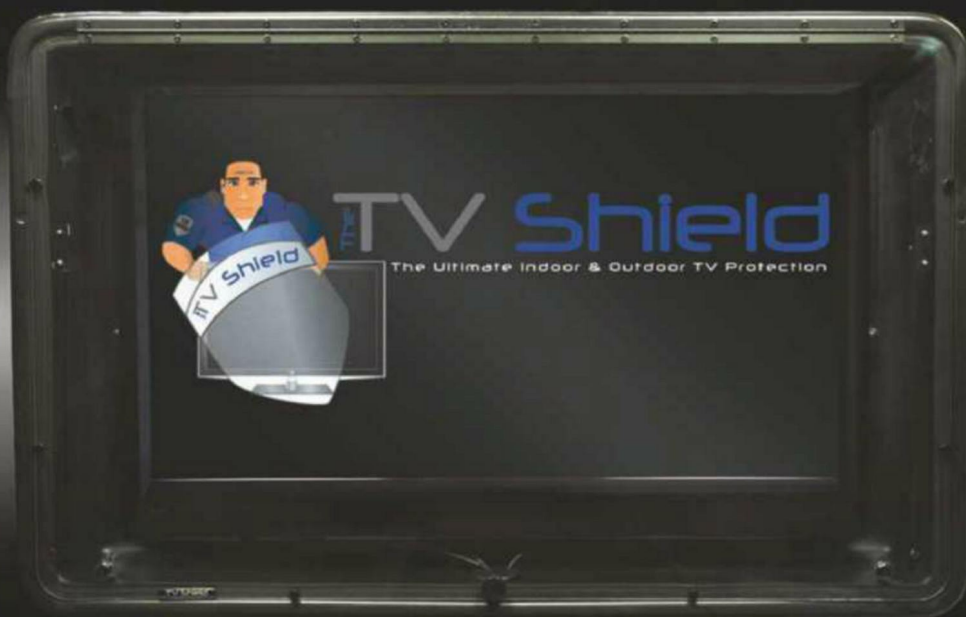
The highly-regarded Kuro TV made its debut at the CEATEC show in Japan in 2006 before arriving in stores a year later, with Pioneer claiming it was the result of a ten-year R&D drive. Further generations were released before the plug was pulled in 2009, but not before HCC had grabbed a glimpse of its 10th-generation prototypes, which sadly never came to market.

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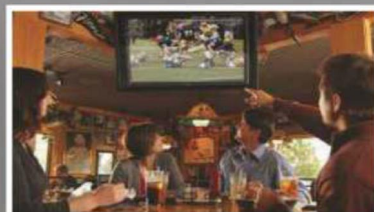
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The ZT65's slender pedestal stand is surprisingly – and reassuringly – heavy

retains its clarity when viewed slightly off-angle. Changes to the production process have resulted in the elimination of the traditional air gap between the outer-glass and panel itself, which has killed those characteristic plasma reflections.

Clash of the TV titans

Until now the last word in plasma picture quality has always been Pioneer's famed Kuro TVs. So is the ZT65 finally able to usurp its throne? To find out, we staged a shoot-out

'While pushing the PDP envelope with the ZT65, Panasonic has written a love letter to plasma'

between a 9th-gen 60in Kuro panel and the ZT65, with an HDBaseT system delivering simultaneous Full HD feeds to both. Despite the Pioneer being somewhat elderly, the slugfest between the two screens transpired to be epic. The Kuro has always led the field when it came to gorgeous velvety blacks, effortless shadow detail and vibrant image clarity – all characteristics now shared with the ZT65.

Both panels deliver ebony excellence, with the Panasonic generally producing deeper hues, although these could at times seem oversaturated. The ZT65 also inched ahead when it came to fine detail. The Kuro, however, countered with generally better dynamics: video footage of a black and chrome Harley Davidson had just a bit more metallic zing on the older set. After a plethora of picture quality comparisons this clash of the titans was rated a tie.

The Kuro has no truck with 3D, of course; the ZT65's 3D performance is bright and

entertaining. David Attenborough's *Kingdom of Plants* (Sky 3D), a feast of pollen and insects shot in Kew Gardens, proves deeply immersive. Sharp close-ups of the Chinese Water dragons adopt the demeanour of prehistoric dinosaurs on the big Panasonic. While there is some crosstalk evident amongst the fronds, it's not particularly intrusive.

Sonically, the set does a fairly decent job. Stereo imaging is appreciable and the sound not too thin.

There is, however, one fairly unfortunate caveat with this set. The fan noise it generates is omnipresent and has a tone which is often distracting. Obviously this noise can be disguised with volume, but during quiet scenes there's nowhere to hide.

The pixel problem

Another thing to consider here is the Panasonic's far-from generous price tag. Normally we would have no problem recommending buyers open their wallets for a screen of this class, but the arrival of 4K/ Ultra HD TVs may give Panasonic fans pause for thought. For instance, Sony's 55in X9 UHD TV is set to retail for only a couple of hundred quid more than this 60in plasma – Philips and Toshiba will cover a similar ground. So do you want to invest in the best Full HD screen money can buy, or futureproof yourself by grabbing the extra resolution?

Ultimately, that's your decision. Regardless, the TX-P60ZT65 is an engineering triumph. Panasonic has produced a TV capable of breathtaking images which rival, and in some cases exceed, those from Pioneer's legendary Kuro range. And, of course, it trumps those models with a Smart feature set that's positively exhaustive and an industrial design that's simply beautiful. Panasonic may well have set out to push the PDP envelope with the ZT65, but what it has actually done is write a love letter to the plasma era ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Panasonic My Home Screen interface can be used to bring all your sources, both online and networked, together on a single page for easy access. Different versions can be customised to your family's needs

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter, two pairs of glasses supplied

FULL HD: Yes, 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD and 2 x Freesat HD

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; AV adaptor for component/Scart/composite; 3 x USB; optical audio output; Ethernet; SD card slot; CI slot

SOUND: 20W

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,404(w) x 828(h) x 47(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 35.5kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Hexa Processing Engine; 3,000Hz Focused Field Drive; Intelligent Frame Creation; Smart Viera My Home Screen UI; Skype; USB hard drive recording; USB, DLNA and SD card media playback; Swipe & Share 2.0 compatible

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic TX-P60ZT65

→ £3,800 Approx

→ www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Scintillating picture quality, with deep blacks and superb shadow detail; outstanding fine detail performance; advanced Smart feature set; beautiful glass and metal design

LOWS: Intrusive fan noise; limited availability; not 4K

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

MUNICH 2013

HIGH-END HI-JINKS

The Munich High-End Show is now the largest dedicated hi-fi show in the world, but **Ed Selley** discovers there's plenty there for the five-channel AV enthusiast, too

THE HIGH-END SHOW is now in its tenth year in the MOC exhibition centre in Munich, and in that time it has become the largest dedicated hi-fi show on the planet. And unlike many other international events, where AV and hi-fi competes with everything else in consumer electronics from cameras to smart cars, Munich has always retained a strong focus on audio. As a result of this, you can see brands and designs at Munich that rarely break cover anywhere else, including some truly enormous bits of kit and more chrome than a West Coast custom shop.

The MOC is a fantastic venue for the task, combining open halls with a large number of enclosed rooms for demos and – it must be said – some nice bar facilities...

The size of the MOC is important because attendance is generally impressive – the organisers claim total attendance this year was comfortably over 18,000. While the focus of the show is very much geared towards two-channel fans, there were a raft of superb multichannel demonstrations in evidence, too. Here are some of the highlights.

Quadral Aurum surround system, £21,000

As the 'home show' for the German audio brands, Munich is a good excuse for them to pull out all the stops – and Quadral was no exception. As well as its own room that was mainly devoted to display products and stereo, it also prepared a multichannel demo in a sealed booth on the hall level. This made use of a no-holds-barred collection of its flagship Aurum speakers, including the range-topping Titan and the extraordinary-looking Base Titan centre speaker, which is going to need a hefty cabinet to support it. With ribbon tweeters and Quadral's bespoke Altima drivers, the result was an exquisite combination of huge sound with excellent fine detail and effects retrieval.

McIntosh surround system, £100,000+

Big as the Quadral setup was, even it had to give ground to the enormous array cobbled together by US high-end brand McIntosh. Although McIntosh makes a complete range of multichannel power

amps, it decided to treat show-goers and use 600W MC601 monoblocks for each channel. Partnered with the company's MX151 AV processor and MVP891 Blu-ray player, the resulting stack of electronics weighed the best part of a ton and should bring dollar signs to the eyes of anyone asked to make a rack for it. In tandem with the company's X Series speaker system, the performance proved effortlessly powerful and entirely cinematic – even a German dubbed version of *The Dark Knight Rises* hit the spot.

Nubert nuVero Speakers, £10,000

German speaker brand Nubert didn't go to quite the same extremes as Quadral and McIntosh, but its demonstration of a system comprising nuVero 14 floorstanders, nuVero 7 centre speaker/surrounds and potent AW-17 subwoofer was extremely enjoyable. While not able to match the scale of the larger demos, the integration between the speakers was absolutely top-notch, creating a fantastic soundstage. Nubert was generally showcasing multichannel music rather than movie soundtracks

'McIntosh's enormous array used monoblock amps and proved both effortlessly powerful and entirely cinematic'

– this can go horribly wrong with some speakers, but here gave a performance that was controlled, refined and immersive. Nubert is yet another brand that specialises in direct sales, and at present its products don't seem to be available in the UK. Based on this display, it would be welcome here if it decided to change that.

Tannoy Precision Series, £900-£2,000

Tannoy had given its demo area over to the retro-tastic (and reassuringly expensive) Prestige line but had the more attainable Precision range on static display. Intended to slot between the Revolution and Definition ranges, the Precisions are an amalgam of features from both. This means that the trademark dual concentric driver is present in all models – in this case a newly-designed 6in iteration. The centre and floorstanding models in the four-

Both Quadral and McIntosh (bottom) showcased premium multichannel solutions





Direct sales brand Nubert (above right) likes speakers with plenty of drivers

Stereo fans flocked to hear PMC's new Fact.12 floorstander (left)

Focal's various entry-level Chorus 700 cabinets (below)



A Pagani Huayra with Sonus Faber speakers turned some heads (above)

Cabasse (below) brought a phalanx of concentric driver models to the MOC

Show-goers were greeted by a troupe playing Alpine horns (bottom)



KEF's new V series (above) includes its first foray into the soundbar market

Sonos (right) demo'd its PlayBar and SUB products

Tannoy's new Precision range (bottom) – only in black in 5.1



strong lineup add a conventional driver of the same size. With no chance of hearing them, attendees could only gawp – lucky for Tannoy that these cabinets are lush to behold. A minor oddity, though, is that a multichannel system including the centre will only be available in piano black rather than the walnut finish available for the stereo models. Pah.

IsoTek Evo 3 Venus, £TBC

Against a backdrop of 6ft speakers and amplifiers made from depleted unobtainium, mains treatment can come across as a bit dull. Despite this, there are some useful gains in performance to be had and IsoTek is busy putting the finishing touches on the Evo3 Venus to bring some of the technology it employs in its mighty Titan mains conditioner to a more terrestrial price. Designed with a view to supplying a standard AV system with power, the IsoTek is intended to reduced Common Mode and Differential Mode mains noise, and is also able to keep your expensive equipment protected from damage in the event of surges and spikes. A UK plug version will be available when it goes on sale in late Summer.

Cambridge Audio Aero Speakers, £TBC

Down on Cambridge Audio's sizeable open-plan stand was another all-new speaker range. Having deliberated, cogitated and digested the data from the BMR-driver based Minx speakers, the UK marque has now transplanted the technology to the full-size Aero lineup. While these look reasonably conventional, the relationship between the BMR and the traditional driver is different to the norm – the BMR is capable of working well below 1kHz, which shifts the crossover out of the most critical point of listening and means the lower driver is devoted mainly to providing bass extension. Of particular interest to AV-hedz are the rear speakers, which make use of a larger BMR and offer the choice of working as a classic bipole rear, or as two speakers in a single cabinet, thus providing seven channels from five enclosures.

Focal Chorus 700 Series, £350-£1,300

Hoping to keep the Aero's honest will be Focal's



Cambridge Audio's Aero range offers bipole/direct radiating rears (top), while IsoTek's Evo 3 Venus AV Power Centre protects against surges and noise-ridden mains power

new Chorus 700 series. The entry-level range in the Focal line-up, the 700s nonetheless feel very much part of the brand's heritage. All models make use of a glass fibre composite for their midbass drivers, and an aluminium tweeter, with technology drip-fed from the mighty Utopia products. The 700 Series features two different sizes of standmount, three floorstanders and a centre speaker, enabling buyers to pick and choose a variety of different arrays. And, despite the very sensible pricing (the two-way Chorus 705 standmount will retail for around £350), Focal reports that all models are manufactured in the EU.

Cabasse Baltic Evolution/Riga/Eole, £9,000/£3,400/£900

Flying the flag for Gallic wackiness, Cabasse was demonstrating different levels of its unique concentric driver design that results in some singular-looking speakers. Whereas most concentric speakers are a tweeter and surrounding midbass driver, Cabasse can scale their design to be up to four or five drivers in series. The three different speakers flaunted in the MOC were arranged in various configurations and the demos served to prove two things. The first is that even in the rarefied surroundings of Munich, the Eole3 (reviewed recently) is still a capable speaker package; the second is that the larger members of the family have considerable ability as multichannel speakers, too, not least thanks to the impressively beefy Santorin subwoofers.

KEF V Series, £TBC

KEF decided to stick two fingers up at convention by offering not one but two sets of AV speakers at a 'stereo' show. As well as the new E series 'eggs', the company also unveiled its V Series speakers. Designed to offer augmented performance to the somewhat weedy speakers that occupy modern tellies, the V300s can be used as stereo or multichannel units and in landscape or portrait arrangements. They're joined by the V700 and V720 soundbars, that are able to take the ARC feed from a TV and endow it with a bit more oomph. The V700 is the soundbar on its own while the V720 adds a wireless subwoofer for additional low-end shove ■

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Jaw-dropping

MOVIE MOMENTS

From audacious car chases and brutal shootouts to Godzilla homages and heads that sprout legs, **Team HCC** rounds up the film sequences that will have you frantically reaching for the rewind button

Vin Diesel and Paul Walker – which one of them is fast and which one is furious?



FAST FIVE (2011)

Crash and carry

By this point in Justin Lin's big-budget sequel, you're already feeling satiated thanks to the preceding mixture of vehicular thrills and good, old-fashioned fisticuffs, yet for the movie's bombastic climax, Lin pulls out all the stops.

Running for over 10 minutes, the bank robbery sequence is a thing of beauty. Filmed in Suan Juan in Puerto Rico (doubling for downtown Rio de Janeiro), it took around two weeks to shoot, and involved the destruction of countless cars (and trees) and the construction of a driveable bank vault – with a squished stunt man inside – allowing Lin to keep the use of CGI to a bare minimum.

The result is a beautifully staged action set-piece, coupled with energetic sound design, that makes most of James Bond's stunts look lightweight. Sure, it's physically impossible, but who cares?

JURASSIC PARK (1993)

Setting sights on Dino

James Cameron's *The Abyss* and *Terminator 2* (and even Barry Levinson's *Young Sherlock Holmes*) had acclimatised many to cutting-edge CG effects, but Steven Spielberg went a step further by using Industrial Light and Magic to breath life into everyone's favourite beasts – dinosaurs! And, while we'll never know if they look realistic unless we invent time travel, they were believable enough to ensure cinemagoers held their breath.

Spielberg knew how to handle their entrance, too, with viewers forced to wait 20 minutes to feast their peepers on his CG creations. The moment it occurs is film history – Laura Dern and Sam Neill acting as astounded as they possibly could staring at thin air, John Williams' beautiful, swelling score and a Brachiosaurus gently gnawing on a treetop.

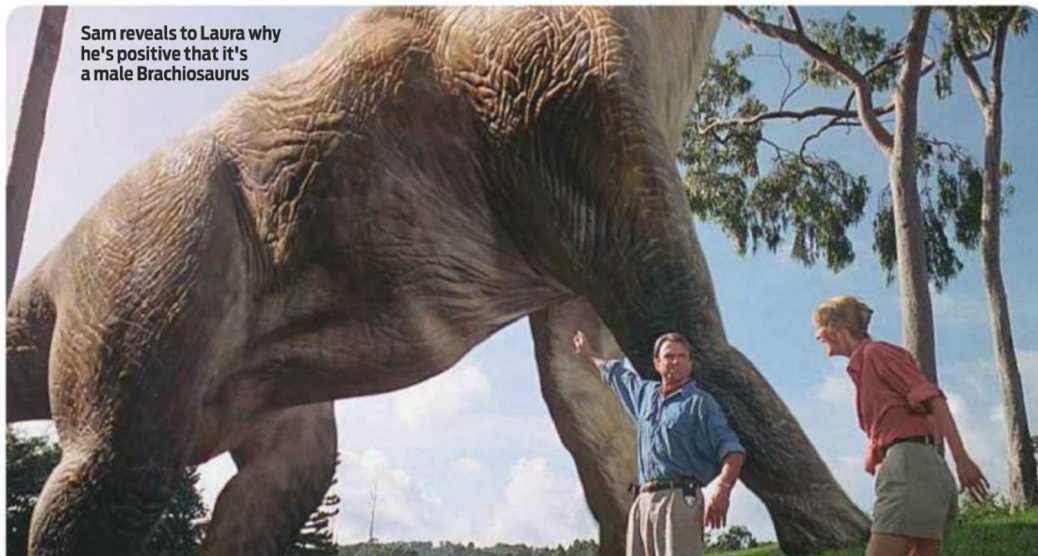
'I AM YOUR FATHER!'

The bit when *Star Wars* stepped it up a notch



George Lucas' sci-fi saga isn't short of mouthwatering moments, from *Episode IV*'s opening spaceship fly-by to *Episode I*'s immersive pod race, but the bit that really leaves the mouth hanging open comes in *Episode IV*, when evil old Darth Vader reveals himself to be Luke's daddy. What had previously been an energetic and slightly silly space romp instantly became a Shakespearian-tinged epic that was bound to end in tragedy. Nice work.

Sam reveals to Laura why he's positive that it's a male Brachiosaurus



HEAT (1995)

Making a withdrawal

Director Michael Mann is no stranger to movie spectacle (the speedboat scenes from *Miami Vice* spring to mind), but he's never bettered *Heat*'s running urban gun-battle for sheer filmmaking bravado. A multi-day shoot using a lorry-load of ammunition, it's probably cinema's most frighteningly realistic bullet-fest – helped in no small part by Mann's meticulous planning. This included calling on Andy McNab to guide Robert de Niro and Val Kilmer in the art of heavy weapons handling: 'I wanted everyone really well trained, so that they felt they could actually do what the characters in this film do,' explained Mann.

Another key factor is the soundtrack. While the initial robbery is accompanied by a tense, rhythmic soundtrack, as soon as guns are levelled the music stops and all viewers are left with is a barrage of precisely-steered bullets and panicked screams.

Thankfully we've never found ourselves cowering for cover in the midst of an armed robbery, but we imagine it feels a lot like this.



Above: Val Kilmer trained with ex-SAS soldier Andy McNab in practice for *Heat*'s show-stopping gun fight

CRANK 2: HIGH VOLTAGE (2009)

B-movie shenanigans

This pulp movie sequel is downright weird – anything starring Geri Halliwell, Corey Haim, Ron Jeremy and David Caridine was always going to be – but the writer/director duo of Neveldine/Taylor really, er, crank up the oddity factor for the fight sequence between Jason Statham's anti-hero Chev Chelios and Triad gangster Johnny Vang.

Chelios pursues Vang into a power plant, gets tangled in some electrical cables and becomes a gigantic Godzilla-style monster version of himself. What follows is an outrageous, hysterical B-movie pastiche, complete with miniature models of electric pylons and visible wires as the rubber-suited stunt men bump into each other in slow-motion. All the while, the film's surround mix serves up a collection of clanking, fizzing effects, and the visuals themselves are accompanied by authentic-looking scratches and print damage.

Then, after only a minute or so, *Crank 2* reverts back to normal. Well, as normal as it can be.



Crank 2 was filmed on Canon HF10 and XH A1 prosumer cameras, with many being destroyed in the process

THE MATRIX (1999)

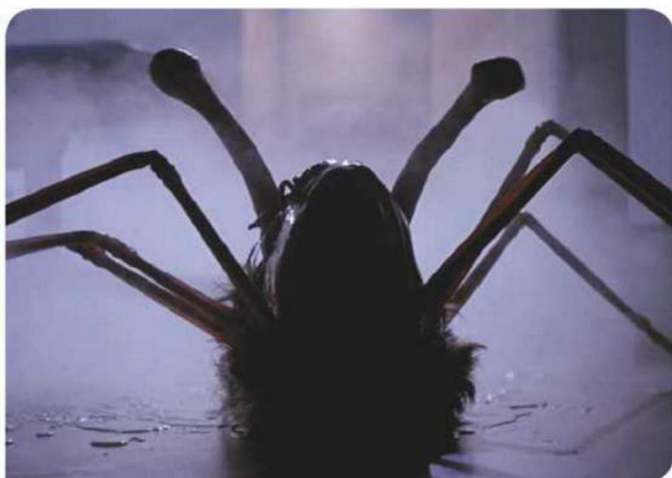
Bullet bonanza

Remember when you first saw *The Matrix*? Of course, you do – it was the film that made both sci-fi and Keanu Reeves cool again, and introduced everyone to the idea of 'bullet-time' visual effects. In fact, this state-of-the-art camera trickery played an important part in the Wachowski brothers' tale as a visual example of the physics-bending powers achievable in the Matrix – which, admittedly, mostly seemed to consist of ducking out of the way of bullets.

The Matrix was a movie people saw in the cinema one night and went back the next day for a second viewing – and it's the famous lobby scene that really wowed. Culminating with Neo's slow-mo



Keanu finally got fed up with people asking him to explain the train station scenes in *The Matrix Revolutions*



The Thing's 'spider-head' was created by VFX guru Rob Bottin, who went on to work on *RoboCop* and *Total Recall*

acrobatics on the rooftop and an impromptu bout of helicopter wrestling, it stays in the memory long after you've forgotten all the dodgy dialogue and confusing plot holes.

THE THING (1982)

A headache like no other

Unlike Hollywood's first attempt at adapting John W. Campbell's sci-fi classic *Who Goes There?* for the big screen (1951's *The Thing from Another World*), John Carpenter's 1982 'remake' positively embraced the novella's central idea of a shape-changing alien.

As the film progresses we witness canine and human flesh disfigured and reworked into the most nightmarish shapes possible – but even so, nothing can really prepare you for the unforgettable sight of a human head detaching itself from a body, growing spider legs and trying to scuttle out of a room without being noticed – a sequence that is at once one of the creepiest things you'll ever see on screen, as well as being one of the funniest.

An American Werewolf in London bagged the inaugural Academy Award for Best Makeup



AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (1981)

Growing pains

Until the 1980s pretty much every single werewolf film handled its transformation scene through a series of close-ups of hands and faces that – via the magic of camera dissolves – would appear to get hairier and more beastly. That all changed with *An American Werewolf in London* and Rick Baker's Oscar-winning special effects.

With the advances being made in prosthetic wizardry, Baker was able to show a human body contorting and twisting itself into the shape of a wolf before cinema-goers' worried eyes. Despite now being more than 30 years old, the scene remains unequalled, not even by the CG transformations that lycanthropes undergo in more recent flicks like *Underworld: The Awakening* and *The Wolfman*. Then again, neither of those were accompanied by the foot-tapping, upbeat tones of Rodgers and Hartz' *Blue Moon*, which makes the entire sequence about 20 per cent more disturbing.



The 5:2 diet was a success in Greece

JASON & THE ARGONAUTS (1963)

You're leg bone's connected to your...

The late, great, visual effects pioneer Ray Harryhausen spent much of the 1950s and 60s astounding audiences with his stop-motion animated monsters. Unforgettable creatures such as the Rhedosaurus, Ymir and Cyclops proved every bit as life-like as the actors they shared the screen with thanks to the 'Dynamation' technique that Harryhausen created.

However, his crowning glory remains the four-minute sequence from *Jason and the Argonauts* where our hero and two of his chums face off against seven skeleton warriors. With each of the model skeletons having five appendages to synchronise with pre-existing live-action footage of the three actors, it's no surprise that the sequence proved to be an almost Herculean task for the animator. Indeed, sometimes completing less than one second of screen time per day, it ended up taking Harryhausen four and a half months to finish.

Runaway Train

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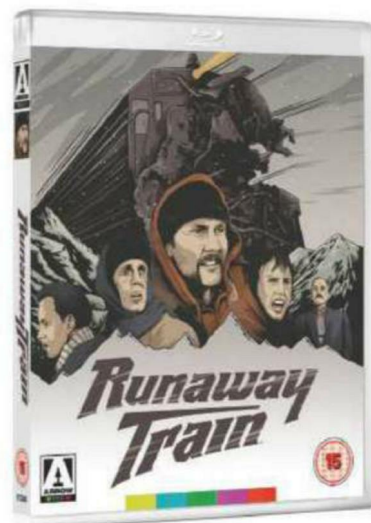


ROGER EBERT

"WRENCHINGLY INTENSE AND BRUTALLY POWERFUL"

VARIETY

From a script by Akira Kurosawa and directed by Andrei Konchalovsky (*Tango and Cash*), *Runaway Train* was a runaway success with critics and audiences, bagging a Golden Globe for Jon Voight and 3 Oscar nominations. Made with rugged realism from a script shaped by ex-convict and co-star Edward Bunker (*Reservoir Dogs*) this special edition, mastered from the restoration premiered at the Cannes Film Festival comes loaded with extras including interviews with director and stars and much more!



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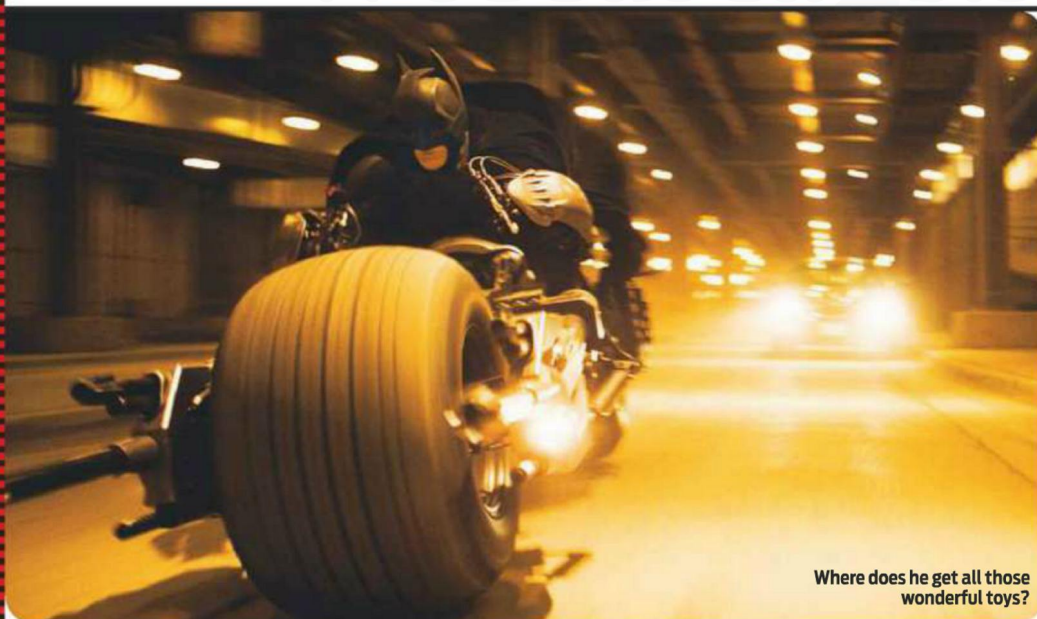
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Where does he get all those wonderful toys?

THE DARK KNIGHT (2008)

Super-sized superheroics

Christopher Nolan's second Batman movie showed audiences that it was possible to make a serious and intelligent film about superheroes. But more than that, for those who got to see it on an IMAX screen it delivered unparalleled spectacle.

The first major Hollywood blockbuster to be partially shot using IMAX cameras (a total of 30 minutes of material) *The Dark Knight* was able to deliver a car chase rendered on a scale previously reserved for grandiose documentaries about the Grand Canyon and the International Space Station. While the Blu-ray release can't replicate the sensation of witnessing the chase on the massive IMAX screen, the enhanced resolution of the film stock used to shoot it means that it remains one of the hi-def encode's best-looking sequences. And we all want a spin on that Batpod...

CHILDREN OF MEN (2006)

One-take wonder

About halfway through the forest road getaway scene in Alfonso Cuarón's slick sci-fi, you realise something weird is going on – everything that's happened, including the car being ambushed by

marauding motorcyclists and Julianne Moore's character Taylor getting a bullet in the head, has been in one continuous take, with the camera moving in and out of the car and around the seats, absorbing all the action. It's both disconcerting and utterly breathtaking.

While the sequence only lasts about four minutes, it required seven days to film using a custom-designed vehicle and camera rig. It's not actually one take, either, with digital transitions used to blend chunks together – but it's oh-so-hard to spot them.

BAD BOYS II (2003)

Destruction derby

Give director Michael Bay the right script – and a few million dollars – and he'll engineer something spectacular, like this astonishing car/truck chase from his cop movie sequel. Actually, it's more than a mere car chase, it's a running gun battle, interspersed with multiple pileups, squealing tyres and, naturally, some wry wisecracks from the lead cast, before climaxing with a vehicle transporter offloading its contents across a Miami bridge. In the *Transformers* movies and *The Island*, Bay has tried to recapture the magic, but not matched the mayhem here. And, apparently, the whole sequence was shot without damaging the iconic Ferrari 575M Maranello ■

ALL ABOARD!

Back in ye olden days, this is what passed for AV thrills



Auguste and Louis Lumière dazzled members of the public 117 years ago with *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* – a 50-second, single-shot film of a steam locomotive pulling into a train station. Despite a lack of evidence to back up the claims, legend has it that audiences ran screaming to the back of the room to avoid being hit by the train. Heaven only knows what they'd have made of *Avatar* in 3D.



Drinking a strawberry milkshake on a bumpy road is fraught with peril



Star Will Smith hasn't made an R-rated film since *Bad Boys II* – boo!

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The finishing touch

Mark Craven reports on a cinema room that went from functional to fabulous

OOH LA LA!
Oscar star *Les Misérables* is ready to sing on BD, p103



The cinema was previously a traditional-looking living room

WHILE WE USUALLY think of custom installers as building cinema rooms and integration projects from scratch, they can also be called upon to freshen up an existing system, taking over what are often considered the 'finishing touches', such as lighting and intelligent control.

This home theatre, completed by Midlands-based company AV Candy, is a case in point. The owner already had a five-seater system, incorporating a Pioneer SC-LX85 AV receiver,

BDP-LX55 Blu-ray player and JVC HD1 projector, assembled in a traditional-looking living room. He called upon AV Candy to improve the usability – and, of course, performance – and the result is a dazzling dedicated room with integrated lighting, air-conditioning and blackout blinds.

Christmas present

The makeover began in September last year and was completed, with a break over the

Christmas period, by January. AV Candy introduced Somfy automated curtain tracks, Mode ColourStyle lighting control and installed in-ceiling and on-wall PMC speakers, partnered with the owner's existing SVS tower subwoofer for a more discreet 5.1 array. Source hardware, and the AMX control processor, were housed in a Middle Atlantic rack in the adjacent Blu-ray and DVD library room (!).

The room layout and decor also underwent a major transformation, with the system

An adjacent room houses the owner's extensive software collection...

...as well as the source and control electronics in a Middle Atlantic rack

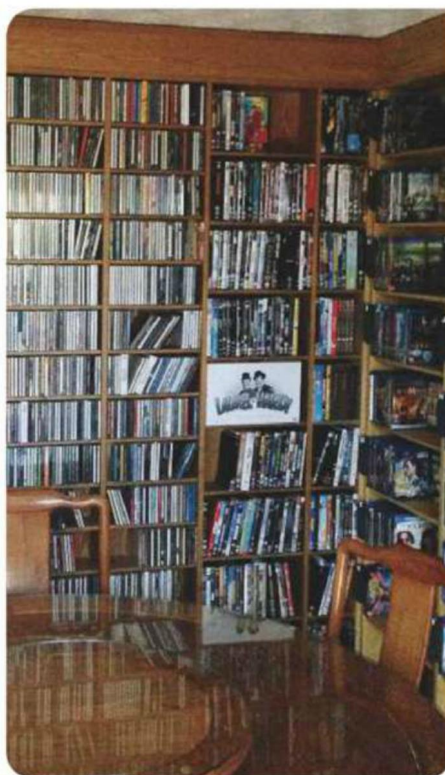


CINEMA ROOM CHECKLIST

JVC: HD1 D-ILA projector
PMC: 5 x Wafer 1
SVS: PC13 Ultra sub
PIONEER: SC-LX85
PIONEER: BDP-LX55
SKY: Sky+HD
SOMFY: Curtain tracks and blackout blind motors/controllers
MIDDLE ATLANTIC: AV rack
AMX: System control processor

rotated by 90 degrees – allowing seating in a single, curved row – and carpeting and movie poster art installed to both improve acoustics and aesthetics.

With the owner's expectations regarding performance and ease of use 'exceeded', AV Candy has now been tasked with adding full control of his home theatre PC to the setup, and expanding the AMX system to other parts of the house previously controlled via a Philips Pronto system ■



The room is decorated with movie poster art, full-length curtains and downlighters

A Samsung UE55D8000 LED TV rises out of the front cabinet for when the owner fancies some smallscreen viewing



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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** SONY STR-DA5800ES high-end AV receiver
 SAMSUNG 46in F7000 series LED TV and BD-F8500 PVR/Blu-ray player combi
 ONKYO Wi-Fi-toting 7.2-channel AVR
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Pioneer spirit

The VSX-923 offers multichannel thrills and a classy design. See p50 for more



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Virtual superstar



Sony continues to festoon its AVR fascias with buttons...

Think you haven't got room for a 9.2-channel system? Then you haven't reckoned on the STR-DA5800ES, says **Steve May**

THE STR-DA5800ES IS an AV receiver unlike any other. With it Sony has avoided the obvious – there's no AirPlay or Bluetooth streaming – but pushed the envelope when it comes to leading-edge signal processing and usability. It's remarkably forgiving of your living space but offers uncompromised audio quality. For many AV enthusiasts this will sound like very good news indeed.

The STR-DA5800ES takes its style cues directly from its predecessor, the STR-DA5700ES. It's a chunky design, albeit not in the super-heavyweight class, distinguished by a stylised tiered fascia that's aesthetically much too fussy.

The receiver is a 9.2-channel affair, rated at 120W per channel (into 8ohms). In addition to the standard seven-channel surround array, there are optional front height channels. Alternatively, you can bi-amp the front stereo pair.

Connectivity is outstanding. With no fewer than nine HDMI inputs (one front-facing), two HDMI outputs with a third HDMI Zone 2 feed, plus five legacy source inputs, you'll not soon run out of ingress. Four of the HDMI inputs can display previews of connected components, aka InstaPrevue, while five inputs facilitate high-speed switching, aka Fast View. Sony has nominated two of the HDMI inputs (2 and 3) as optimal audio connections, ideal for movie playback and SACD performance. In repose, the receiver also offers HDMI passthrough. This means that signal sources connected to the AVR can be viewed without powering up the box; this proves to be invaluable when a set-top box is one of your prime sources, as it really doesn't make sense to fire up the AVR for everything you watch.

As with the STR-DA5700ES, this new receiver has a built-in network switch. However, this time around, Sony's engineering team has gone out of its way to reduce system noise, shutting down each of the LAN points individually when they're not in use, thereby reducing the flow of redundant electrical current.

The STR-DA5800ES is more at home networked than any other AV

receiver you can buy. Once online you can play your own content or take advantage of Sony's catch-up and IPTV services. Unusually for an AVR, there's more video content than audio on tap. You can choose from Video Unlimited, Demand 5, Sky News, LoveFilm, Mubi, Crackle, YouTube, DailyMotion and more, although, annoyingly, no BBC iPlayer. Audio-only diversions are largely limited to Sony's Music Unlimited subscription service and internet radio. There's no Spotify or Last.fm.

À la mode functionality includes 4K upscaling, which may or may not prove of use in the longer term, plus Ultra HD passthrough for those planning to acquire a 4K source of some description. Reflecting the booming interest in outboard DACs, the AVR also sports a USB Type B DAC input, compatible with 192kHz/24-bit audio.

Impressive usability

The user front-end offered by the STR-DA5800ES is terrific, with easily navigated silos dubbed Watch, Listen, Favorites, Easy Automation (a four-scene macro), Sound Effects and Settings. Select Watch and you're greeted with hi-res graphics representing each of the inputs. It's like navigating a Smart TV.

The supplied D.C.A.C. EX auto-calibration system is ruthlessly efficient, making setup a doddle. The stereophonic calibration

mic plugs into the front fascia and takes just 30 seconds to fine-tune speaker distance, level and phase. The results can be overlaid with the characteristics of the Sony engineering room in Shinagawa, left flat or further tweaked.

What's particularly clever is that Sony applies considerable processing grunt to compensate for all those physical restrictions that affect real-world listeners – after all, few of us have a perfect listening room at our disposal. A centre speaker Lift Up function virtually raises the vocal height of the centre speaker, often positioned too low because of physical restraints. By shifting the apparent source of the centre speaker, dialogue intelligibility appears to improve. The scale of adjustment varies from 0-10. >

Two clickers are bundled, and a remote app is also downloadable



AV Info

PRODUCT:
Networked
9.2-channel AVR

POSITION:
The STR-DA5800ES
sits at the top of
Sony's home
cinema AVR lineup

PEERS:
Pioneer SC-LX86;
Yamaha RX-A3020
Denon AVR-4520



No room for physical front height speakers? Then try this AVR's Virtual Front High Speaker function instead, which psycho-acoustically adds cloudy atmospherics. This ambience is actually created out of the main stereo mix, and not any specific height information, but it's surprisingly effective. The mode certainly relocated more chimps into my rafters during Caesar's incarceration pen sequence from *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. Virtual Speaker Relocation is available for all nine channels, allowing you to create a soundstage that would otherwise be impossible to obtain.

Inside the beast

At the heart of the STR-DA5800ES is the latest iteration of Sony's Digital Cinema Sound audio processing technology, dubbed HD-D.C.S. We've heard some clunky DSP over the

'Build quality is exceptional – even *Die Hard 5* at Reference Level shouldn't shake this puppy'

years, all purporting to recreate the acoustics of a movie theatre yet succeeding only in emulating the feel of a 1970s' grindhouse. But here, HD-D.C.S. proves to be a good deal more intriguing. Able to add subtle scale to the soundfield, Sony's latest algorithms find plenty of room to work within the STR-DA5800ES' nine-channel environment. HD-D.C.S. is one audio treatment even purists won't find sucky.

Based on high-resolution acoustic data captured at the Cary Grant Theater dubbing stage on the Sony Pictures Culver City lot, HD-D.C.S. adds various levels of reflection and nuance which mimic the physical characteristics of that theatre. You can select from three flavours: Studio, Theatre and Dynamic. The former recreates the kind of reverb experienced with near-field mixing, and I found it particularly effective on *Game of Thrones* (a show which enjoys a particularly aggressive mix). The Theatre mode is rather more expansive, bringing a crisp dialogue to movies. Dynamic is altogether more overt and can be ruinous on any narration. The opening monologue from *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* sounded as if it was recorded by an Autobot skulking beneath my stairs.

Naturally there's also a plethora of music modes. Of particular interest are a trio of concert hall treatments based on measurements taken in actual locations. The Berlin Philharmonic Hall mode is based on readings taken at the orchestra's home base, while the Concertgebouw mode re-creates the slappier reflections of a huge plaster-walled hall found in Amsterdam. The Musikverein

option emulates a wooden venue in Vienna. While I've never been a major advocate of venue treatments, they do provide an interesting way to shift two-channel sources into a convincing form of multichannel.

Build quality is exceptional. The AVR features a 'Metal Assist Horizontal FB' (Frame and Beam) chassis, which physically connects each side of the box and is designed to provide greater stability when handling excessive LFE. A metal strut runs across the bottom of the chassis lending additional reinforcement, so even *A Good Day to Die Hard* played at Reference Level shouldn't shake this puppy.

There's a cooling fan onboard, but it only comes on when absolutely required; Sony says that 'natural air cooling' keeps it ticking over. In my experience it never ran overly hot.

Let loose at volume

In full flight, the STR-DA5800ES proves massively exciting. It handles big theatrics with the ease of Patrick Stewart. The opening of J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot on Blu-ray is fast and visceral, with high-pitched pings and explosive LFE coming from every angle. There's a



CONNECTIONS

A USB DAC INPUT

Sony provides an asynchronous DAC for laptop fans and new-age streamers

B NETWORK LAN SWITCH

This system-simplifying four-port LAN switch deactivates when not in use to reduce electrical noise

C THREE HDMI OUTS

The STR-DA5800ES offers a dual local HDMI output, plus a Zone 2 HD feed

D SPEAKER TERMINALS

This bank of well-spaced speaker terminals allows for a nine-channel layout with front heights, or bi-amping of the front L/Rs in a 7.1 setup

ON THE MENU



→ Sony's range-topper offers probably the best UI on the AVR market, utilising gorgeous hi-res graphics and an easily-navigated structure. Tweaking settings and browsing for 'net content is therefore fuss-free

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And Neo: X
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1 phono
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 9 x 120W (8ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 5 x S-video; 6 x digital audio (3 x optical and 3 x coaxial)
HDMI: 9 x inputs; 3 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 2-in, 0-out
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) 187.5(h) x 420(d)mm
WEIGHT: 17.8kg
ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; 2 x USB inputs (1 x USB Type B); media playback via DLNA/USB; Sony Entertainment network and content portal; D.C.A.C. EX auto calibration; HDMI preview; ES Remote app; Sound Optimizer; HD Digital Cinema Sound; Virtual height; speaker relocation; Centre Speaker Lift Up mode; automatic phase matching; Portable Audio Enhancer; 3 x 12V triggers



fourth-generation wideband power plant at work here, and it delivers stellar transients. The receiver never rasps at high volume, leaving detail and intelligibility untarnished. As a high-octane multichannel movie machine this ES flagship is a blast.

Of course, you won't always have your pedal to the metal. Step forward the Sound Optimizer, which combats the reduced slam that comes when you need to drop volume (both bass and high frequencies are difficult to perceive at low levels). The Sound Optimizer rather cleverly reinstates the balance found at higher volume with a frequency weighting curve. When engaged, a definite sense of scale is returned to the *Star Trek* universe, even when it's not boldly going at full tilt.

File compatibility on this AVR is excellent, both from USB media and across a network. I successfully played back AAC, M4A, MP3 and WMA, plus WAV and FLAC files up to 192kHz/24-bit 5.1. While there's no support at present for DSD, the fast-rising high-quality download format, Sony promises that this will come at some point during the Summer. The AVR can be firmware updated over a network

connection. Streaming video support (a rarity within the AVR world) covers key codecs and containers such as AVI, MKV, MOV and MPEG.

Naturally the Sony is compatible with all the usual audio codecs, plus DTS Neo: X and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, but it doesn't proffer any form of THX post-processing. Still, there's enough flexibility in the setup options to effectively recreate some of post-processing characteristics that THX offers (small speakers, 80Hz crossover, centre channel EQ etc) should old-schoolers want to experiment.

Inspired update

The STR-DA5800ES is an inspired update on last year's STR-DA5700ES. Almost miraculously, Sony has wedged in two more channels of amplification, bolstered build quality and improved audio processing. The result is a receiver that's inventive, invigorating and flat-out exciting to listen to. What Sony has achieved with virtual channel placement borders on the revolutionary, so for all of us without the space to implement an idealized home cinema, this is worth the price of admission alone. A stunning performer ■

HCC VERDICT



Sony STR-DA5800ES

→ £2,200 Approx → www.sony.co.uk
 → Tel: 0207 3652413

HIGHS: Powerful, dynamic multichannel delivery; advanced audio processing modes; integrated network switch; great user interface; streaming video content support

LOWS: No Airplay; no Spotify; no THX post-processing; no 11-channel pre-out

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Baby brother still beguiles

John Archer reckons Samsung's 'step-down' F7000 series LED TV isn't that much of a step down after all

SAMSUNG'S UE46F8000 IS a frighteningly hard act to follow. Recalling that set's combination of an astonishingly sophisticated Smart TV engine and ground-breaking LED picture quality still puts a big stupid geeky grin on our faces.

So it is that I find myself feeling a weird mixture of anticipation and nervousness when presented with Samsung's step-down model, the UE46F7000. Will it retain enough of the UE46F8000's prowess to still rock our world, or will it just feel like a let-down against its illustrious sibling?

It certainly doesn't look like any kind of poor relation. In fact, many people might prefer the silvery finish applied to its absurdly slender bezel to the darker hues of the UE46F8000, and the less in-yer-face desktop stand (the F8000 arrives with a pedestal large enough to sleep on). Connectivity on the UE46F7000 is strong, too. The combination of four HDMI, three USB ports and both LAN and built-in Wi-Fi options should satisfy even the most demanding AV user. And then there's the unusual slot labelled 'Evolution Kit'. This is where you can attach, next year, one of the annual chipset upgrade 'evolution' cards Samsung is developing, so you can essentially turn your 2013 Samsung TV into a 2014 one for just £250 or so.

Firing the UE46F7000 up immediately introduces Samsung's new multi-hub Smart TV interface, with its canny division of content into five separate categories, first-class graphical presentation, and unprecedentedly clever (for a TV) learning capabilities, whereby the set monitors

your viewing habits and recommends content to you based on your 'history'.

The set also sports the gesture and voice control options Samsung is so fond of. I've tended to be rather less keen on these approaches, on account of their fiddliness, proneness to mistakes and my general resistance to relating to a TV in such 'personal' ways. However, recent firmware updates have undeniably made them much more worthwhile, with gesture control now a viable option if you can't find your remote, and the voice control system now offering genuine shortcuts to content – once you've invested time into learning its preferred forms of banter.

You might be wondering at this point why anyone would consider spending £300 more to secure the UE46F8000 over the UE46F7000. But if you look hard enough, there are a few areas where the UE46F7000's features fall short. The most important of these finds the UE46F7000 analysing less zones of incoming images when calculating the optimal settings for its picture parameters, likely resulting in slightly less finely judged results.

Also potentially major if you're not adding the UE46F7000 to a separate audio system is its use of a much less powerful speaker setup. Essentially you don't get the flagship set's woofers, presumably leading to a hefty reduction in bass.

A big slice of Pi

My testing Blu-ray *du jour* is *The Life of Pi* (2D and 3D). And I'm pleased to report that the UE46F7000 left me drooling in admiration throughout both versions of Ang Lee's visual feast.

The night-time shots on the mysterious 'carnivorous' island, for instance, reveal both an excellent black level response and an almost ▶



The streamlined touchpad still covers the key control options



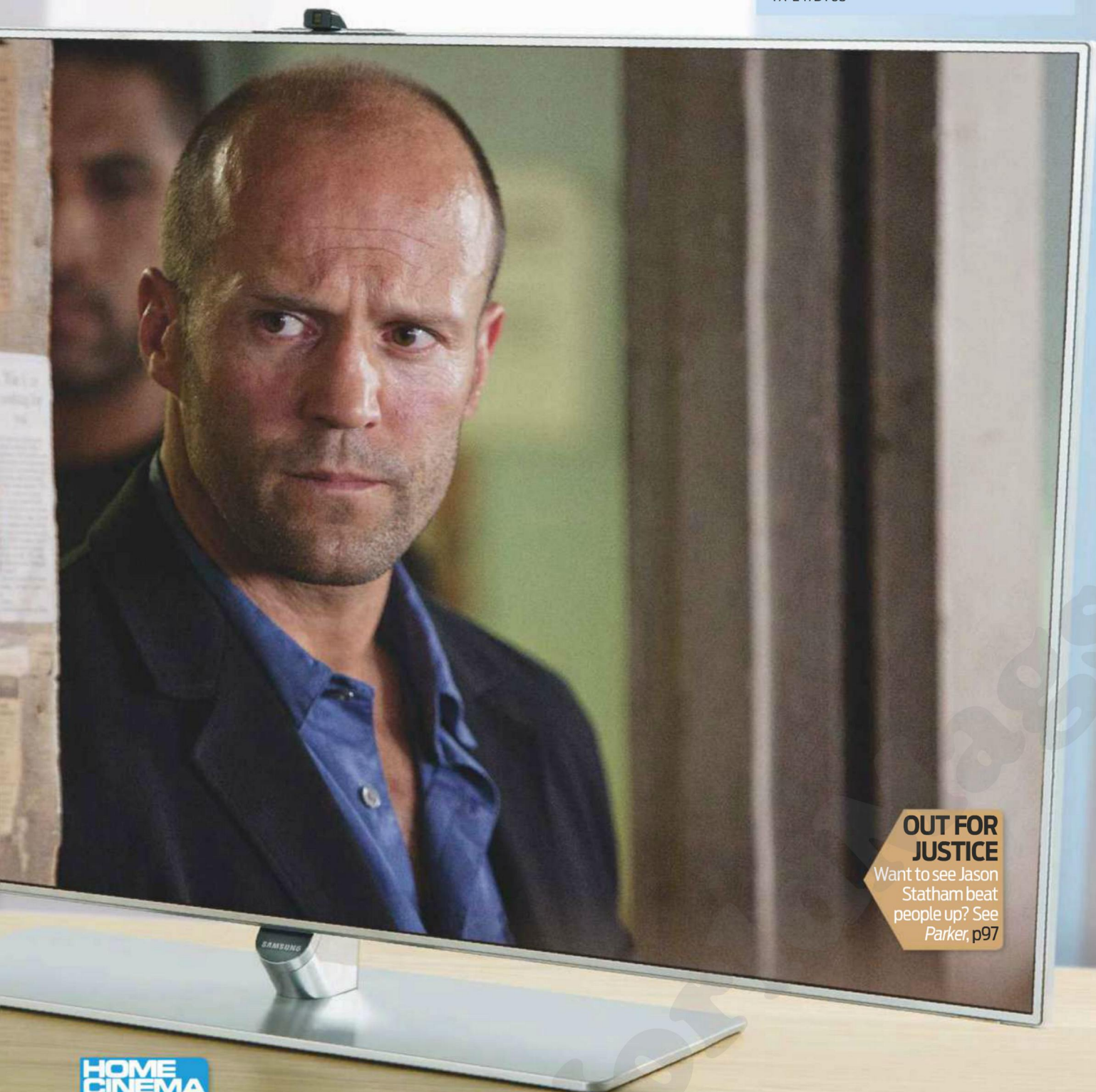
With its ultra-thin bezel, the 46in F7000 looks worthy of its £1,600 ticket

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Slim-line, 3D-capable 46in Smart LED TV

POSITION: One step below the top tier of Samsung's 2013 Full HD LCD TV range

PEERS: Sony KDL-46W905; Panasonic TX-L47DT65

**OUT FOR JUSTICE**

Want to see Jason Statham beat people up? See *Parker*, p97





The UE46F7000 is ready for Samsung's Evolution Kit

complete dearth of the sort of backlight inconsistencies that have been the single significant flaw of Samsung's previous LED TV generations.

This is especially true if you employ the new Cinema Black feature, which can deactivate the LEDs that correspond to the sections of picture occupied by the black bars you get above and below the image when watching CinemaScope/2.35:1-ratio films.

Despite the intensity and consistency of the UE46F7000's black levels, pictures containing

'Its 3D combination of sharpness, clarity, detail and contrast is unmatched by any other brand to date'

a mix of bright and dark content – such as the underwater shots during *Life of Pi*'s boat-sinking sequence – still look punchy and contrasty, while bright scenes like *Pi*'s daytime tussles with the tiger invariably appear superbly intense and rich.

Intense experience

The picture presets on Samsung TVs tend to be rather obsessed with 'impact' in their out-of-the-box state. This means that as well as the intense contrast and colours, sharpness levels are extremely high. So much so that *Life of Pi*'s often very simple backdrops can sometimes look a bit fizzy. Don't worry, though. For, as usual with recent Samsung TVs, the



The built-in camera serves motion control and Skype

UE46F7000 carries more than enough picture calibration aids to ensure you can rein such issues in, with simple downward tweaks of the provided sharpness, backlight and contrast controls offering a good quick fix.

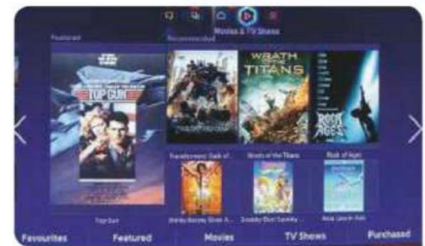
For more confident users, the set also has enough tools at its disposal to support a full and impressively accurate REC 709 calibration if you like.

Motion is handled well by the UE46F7000. Even if you don't want to employ the provided motion processing systems, only aggressive pans cause a noticeable lessening in resolution. Switching over to the 3D version of *Life of Pi* reveals it to be a superlative performer in the third dimension, too. Its 3D combination of sharpness, clarity, detail, colour vibrancy and contrast is for me unmatched by any other TV brand to date – especially as Samsung has finally cracked its old Active 3D nemesis of crosstalk noise, so that even shots from *Pi*'s raft, showing objects in the extreme distance, tend to remain untroubled by crosstalk's ghosting issues.

Spectacular though they are in 2D and 3D mode, the UE46F7000's images don't hit quite the same heights as those of the step-up UE46F8000. The contrast range is narrower, and colours are slightly less rich and nuanced. Sonically, meanwhile, it falls short of its posher kin by some margin, sounding thinner and proving more prone to compression and even distortion when driven hard.

Still, while these issues make saving up for the UE46F8000 worthwhile if you can, they don't stop the UE46F7000 from being another scarily strong contender when pitched against its similarly-priced peers ■

ON THE MENU



→ Samsung's user interface is endowed with snazzy graphics and browsing is swift courtesy of the TV's quad-core processing. There are five main parts of the Smart portal, including the Movies & TV Shows section (pictured) which aggregates content from VOD and catch-up services

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active, with two pairs of glasses supplied

FULL HD: Yes, 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, Freesat HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Scart; composite video input; headphone output; digital audio output; component video input; Evolution Kit slot; CI slot

SOUND: 2 x 10W

BRIGHTNESS: N/A

CONTRAST RATIO: N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,037(w) x 622.3(h) x 34.4(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 11.4kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB and DLNA multimedia playback; Smart TV system with five-hub interface; 800CMR motion processing; screen mirroring support; upgradable via Evolution Kit; gesture and voice control options; ships with second touchpad remote; S Recommendation Engine

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE46F7000

→ £1,600 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
→ Tel: 0330 7267864

HIGHS: Exceptional 2D and 3D picture quality; gorgeous, space-saving design; remarkably clever smart system

LOWS: Pictures not as punchy as those of the F8000 range; sound is only average; Smart interface can confuse at times

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Wot? No Wi-Fi?

Mark Craven auditions Pioneer's newest mid-range AVR and, amongst the multichannel thrills, tries to remember where he left his reel of Ethernet cable

AVR MANUFACTURERS ARE obsessed with matching their TV counterparts and introducing a gamut of new models each year, despite *bona fide* audio developments being few and far between. As such, Pioneer's VSX-923 represents a revamp of the VSX-922 (itself a revamp of the VSX-921), sharing many of the same features and design. In fact, apart from doing away with the drop-down flap on the front which hid the USB input and setup mic jack, the front of the VSX-923 is identical to its forebear. This equates to a nice big display flanked by two hefty knobs (volume and input selection), all set off by a brushed

black chassis that will match the other noir components on your rack. It's kinda stylish, in a discreet sort of way.

Its vital statistics include seven channels of amplification (rated at 150W, 6ohms), twin subwoofer outputs, 7-in/2-out HDMI connectivity, comprehensive DLNA and USB music file playback and compatibility with every Apple product under the sun – AirPlay is offered here, as is HTC Connect, if you own one of that brand's compatible handsets.

Control can be done via Pioneer's iControlAV app, which my colleagues have previously enthused about. Personally, I'm an

old-school trad handset guy, and here the VSX-923 suffers from a crammed remote that takes a while to get used to. Initial setup isn't aided by having the manual on a supplied disc (along with Pioneer's AVNavigator wizard) – but you'll inevitably end up here as the receiver offers so many features (many worth exploring, such as the Sound Retriever compressed audio enhancer that worked wonders with my MP3s), that you'll struggle to activate without help.

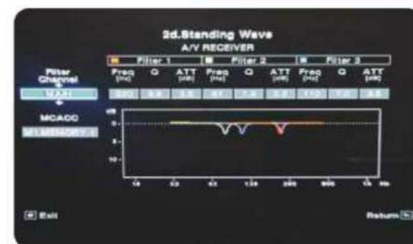
Eminently listenable

After running the automated, and quite



The VSX-923 is almost a dead ringer for last year's VSX-922

ON THE MENU



→ The Pioneer's menus are well presented, if a little slow in operation. There's an option to switch between Expert and Basic control modes – doing the latter disables most of the menu options, meaning there's no danger of your cat accidentally tweaking the room EQ settings...

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And Neo: X
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 150W (6ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 2 x digital audio (1 x optical and 1 x coaxial)
HDMI: 7 x inputs; 2 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: yes 1-in, 0-out
DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 168(h) x 362.5(d) mm
WEIGHT: 9.7kg
ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; USB; 2 x subwoofer outputs; Wi-Fi and Bluetooth via adaptor(s); DLNA/USB media playback, including FLAC, Apple Lossless and WMA; 4K passthrough; vTuner internet radio; iControlAV2013 and AVNavigator compatible; AirPlay; MCACC EQ; PQLS; Sound Retriever; Stream Direct mode; Virtual Height/Width/Depth/Surround Back channels

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Mid-range
7.2-channel AVR

POSITION:
Below the VSX-1123,
and the higher-end
SC-x models

PEERS:
Onkyo TX-NR626;
Yamaha RX-V675

lengthy, MCACC EQ program, the VSX-923 unleashes a dynamic soundscape that is eminently listenable. The thudding kick drums of Machine Head's *Unto The Locust* pack a real punch, with the mid-range groove metal riffs oozing from my speakers with menace and body, and higher frequencies sweetly defined. Compared to my own Yamaha RX-V673 receiver, though, the Pioneer seems a tad tighter in its presentation; not quite as airy. That's not necessarily a bad thing, as it equates to gloriously pin-sharp surround effects with movies. The escape sequence in *Children of Men* (see page 36) is delivered with nail-biting tension – breaking glass shatters in the rear right of the soundstage, worried voices shriek behind you and the buzzing engine of a falling motorbike drones from the front left to the centre channel before fading in the distance. The Pioneer's steering impresses, and it relishes ambient effects; the soundscape of a farmyard in late evening is awash with tweeting birds, a gentle breeze and lowing cattle. Clive Owen's grumbling dialogue, meanwhile, is articulated well, and switching discs to *Jurassic Park* finds John Williams' memorable orchestral score swelling with well-defined strings and horns. All told,

the VSX-923 has an audio quality that's hard not to like, and there are numerous ways to refine its output to suit your tastes.

There's a drawback to Pioneer's receiver, however – namely that both its Bluetooth and Wi-Fi capabilities require the purchase of additional (separate) adaptors. Its rival, Onkyo, has taken the lead here this year, and seeing as I even own a clock radio with built-in Wi-Fi it's a hard oversight to stomach – especially as the VSX-923 aims to be an all-singing, all-dancing network hub. Relief does come from the AVR's £450 price tag, which is, oddly, a full £150 less than last year's model, so those adaptors (roughly £50 each) might be within your budget. But I can see many giving the Onkyos enviable glances.

As such, the VSX-923 is a good, but not perfect AVR. It's not just this connection irritation, either. Getting the best out of it requires real effort, as its myriad features and surround modes are hardly presented in the most intuitive way. For instance, using the supplied remote to switch on virtual height speakers requires 19 button presses – I counted them – and I believe its general usability could be improved. That said, I have few complaints regarding its sonic prowess ■

HCC VERDICT



Pioneer VSX-923

→ £450 Approx → www.pioneer.co.uk
→ Tel: 01753 789 789

HIGHS: Energetic, precise multichannel audio; Sound Retriever feature works well; packed with features; sturdy build and neat design
LOWS: No built-in Wi-Fi or Bluetooth; complex operation; lacks Spotify; post-processing modes are hit and miss

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

Double your money

Samsung continues to make Blu-ray player/PVR combi decks that will appeal to those after a simplified life. **Danny Phillips** is impressed, yet says improvements could be made

THE BD-F8500 IS a 3D Blu-ray player and Freeview PVR in a single slim-line box, ideal for those who want to cut down on clutter. Furthermore, it incorporates Samsung's online portal, blessed with the best selection of VOD content on the market – it's currently the only hub to offer the full gamut of BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5. That makes it a thorn in the side of YouView, the recently-launched platform that integrates the above streaming services into the Freeview EPG.

The BD-F8500 is an evolution of last year's BD-E8500, a fact reflected in the tweaked design. It's subtle but effective, using a curved corner to lift it from black box obscurity. There's a plasticky feel to the casing, though.

The simple socket line-up includes HDMI and optical digital outputs, RF input/

loopthrough and Ethernet. Wi-Fi is built in. Two USB ports let you play music, video and photo from flash drives, while a CI slot on the side is your pathway to pay TV. The absence of Scart outputs means anyone hoping to copy HDD recordings onto DVD or Blu-ray can whistle.

Inviting interface

Power up the BD-F8500 and you're greeted by Samsung's new Smart Hub interface, a budget version of its 2013 TV GUI.

The home menu is slick yet surprisingly simple, using large rectangular panels, crisp cover art and bold colours – not a million miles from Windows 8's Metro desktop, in fact. There are shortcuts to online apps and the Schedule Manager, as well three icons along the top guiding you towards Movies & TV

Shows, Apps and Photos, Videos & Music.

The Apps portal is richly stocked, offering a mixture of the very useful – Netflix, LoveFilm, Blinkbox, YouTube, etc – and a rarely-to-be-used plethora of games, puzzles and obscure lifestyle apps. Still, despite the dross, overall it's an unparalleled selection that should make certain rivals hang their heads in shame.

Photos, Videos & Music is where you'll find your own content, stored on USB drives, DLNA servers and discs. Finding content is long-winded – it feels like there's one menu too many in the sequence – but format support is exhaustive, especially with Samsung's Allshare software installed on your device.

The eye-catching design is backed up by lightning quick operation thanks to a dual-core processor under the bonnet. However, there's a

The built-in 500GB HDD will store around 124 hours of HD broadcasts



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
500GB Smart PVR
and 3D BD player

POSITION:
One of two PVRs in
the range alongside
1TB BD-F8900

PEERS:
Humax DTR-T1010;
Panasonic
DMR-PWT635;
LG HR935M

nagging feeling that Samsung hasn't maximised the potential of having Smart TV and Freeview under one roof.

For starters, it lacks the On TV section and S-Recommendation feature found on its TVs. This would have been a huge benefit inside a PVR, allowing you to schedule Freeview recordings from recommendations, TiVo-style. It's also a pity that Samsung hasn't followed YouView's lead and blended catch-up TV into the EPG rather than keeping it separate.

Despite that, the EPG is terrific. Every scrap of information is packed into a single screen, including live TV and the programme synopsis. The Freeview info banner carries on the good work, allowing you to search the entire schedule. And when it comes to recording, the BD-F8500 matches its rivals. Dual tuners on board let you record two channels at once, all while surfing the web or calling up the EPG. Indeed, the unit brings all the recording and playback functionality we've come to expect from a Freeview PVR – series links, recording clash alerts and pausing/rewinding of live TV.

The BD-F8500's 500GB hard disk holds 124 hours of HD telly or 200 hours of SD. These days, that feels a bit meagre, so the 1TB BD-F8900 is probably a better bet, especially as it's only £50 more.

The Samsung offers no recording modes, so you can't drop the quality to make room for more content. Furthermore, the Recorded TV

menu is buried within the player's UI; at least when you get there recordings are neatly arranged with thumbnails. You can display by date, title or channel, plus basic editing tools let you chop up and split them.

As a Blu-ray player the BD-F8500 is equally talented. Playback is engrossing, and there's 3D support, HD audio decoding and it boots up fast. There's also a range of other networking tricks including screen mirroring, which displays your phone's screen on to your TV (ideal for gamers) and iOS/Android remote app control. The supplied, lightweight remote does a decent job, though.

The BD-F8500's picture performance is excellent. Time-shifted HD and SD shows present no obvious difference to their live counterparts. The Samsung captures every scrap of detail in hi-def programmes, resulting in a vibrant, piercing picture. SD channels are comparatively soft, with some MPEG smudging on backgrounds and bandy shading, but that's down to Freeview's limitations.

This picture prowess, coupled with an extensive range of features and simplified user interface, make the BD-F8500 an impressive product. My only gripe is that Smart and Freeview features are kept separate – closer integration of these in the EPG (like YouView) alongside S-Recommendation for Freeview (like Samsung's TVs) would make the experience even more rewarding ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Samsung's interface is similar to its all-in-one systems, rather than its current Smart TVs. Highlighting the large icons lets you drill down and find content, whether off-air recordings, catch-up TV or apps. DLNA playback is a bit cumbersome

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. 500GB

TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: HDMI v1.4; optical audio; Ethernet; 2 x USB; CI slot; RF input and loopthrough

DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 55(h) x 282(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.6kg

FEATURES: 3D Blu-ray playback; AVCHD, DivX HD, MKV, WMV, JPEG, MPO, LPCM, AAC, MP3, WMA playback; Dolby TrueHD & DTS-HD Master Audio decoding; Smart Hub with BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5; web browser; CD ripping; Allshare; Series Link; screen mirroring; iOS/Android remote app; built-in Wi-Fi; Wi-Fi Direct; basic programme editing

HCC VERDICT



Samsung BD-F8500

→ £300 Approx → www.samsung.com/uk

→ Tel: 0330 7267864

HIGHS: Generous features; catch-up TV; solid picture quality; flexible recording

LOWS: Long-winded Allshare menus; awkward web browsing; Smart and Freeview functionality could be better integrated

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Beasts of bass

It might only be the 'point one' in a soundtrack but a good subwoofer makes a movie. **Ed Selley** tests four organ-rattlers with appetising price tags

GOLDENEAR FORCEFIELD 3, £550
A quirky design hides an 8in driver powered by a 1,000W amp

QUADRAL QUBE 10, £525
Lush-looking 10-incher from the German speaker specialist

REL ACOUSTICS T-7, £650
Class A/B powered cube-shaped woofer with good connectivity

SVS SB12-NSD, £650
Does its big 12in driver also make it the best?

A force to be reckoned with

It may be the smallest subwoofer in this group test, but it packs a fearsome punch



I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the ForceField3 as part of a complete GoldenEar system last year and it left quite an impression. This is comfortably the smallest subwoofer here but also by far and away the most powerful. With 1,000W on tap, the ForceField3 has over twice as much grunt as its competitors. This in turn then motivates the smallest driver in the group – an 8in forward-firing design.

On its own, this 8in driver might be a little outmatched, but it is boosted by a large quadratic planar infrasonic radiator that is mounted on the underside of the chassis. This effectively turns the underside of the sub into an extra driver and gives the ForceField 3 a claimed performance down to 18Hz – although this seems unlikely without a fair whack of roll off.

'The arrival of the tsunami in *The Impossible* is the cue for a staggering level of bass-fuelled terror'

Around the back, the ForceField3 is the simplest of the four roundup rivals. A single LFE input is fitted alongside high-level connections (in and out) and controls for crossover and level. The build is solid enough but the ForceField3 doesn't look or feel particularly special, unless you have a passion for black-clad trapezoids. The custom-designed drivers all seem impressively substantial, though, and the rubber feet should prove friendly to wooden floors.

If your sole requirement for a subwoofer is to make action films something that you feel as much as see, you could possibly skip the rest of this group test and go out and buy a ForceField3. Put bluntly, its rivals here cannot match the absolute ferocity of this brash American upstart. For instance, the arrival of the tsunami in real-life disaster flick *The Impossible* (Blu-ray, DTS-HD MA 5.1) is the cue for the ForceField3 to unleash a truly staggering level of bass-fuelled terror. Even level-matched with the other subs, the GoldenEar simply has much more low-end extension. Given the size of the cabinet, this is a significant achievement.

And when switching to broadcast TV the GoldenEar continues to generate truly phenomenal levels – my favourite scene in an episode of *Elementary*, involving some pacemaker manipulation, has an oscillating bass note that really collects in the temples to give a sense of the distress of the unfortunate person being targeted. This is a woofer that frightens.

Mover and shaker

There are a few flies in the ointment, though. The GoldenEar can struggle to put its truly titanic output out into the room and during some test work actually started to move about, which is not ideal. Furthermore, while the bass that the ForceField3 generates is extremely powerful, some of the fine detail that the other subwoofers can find in film

soundtracks becomes lost in the sheer energy of its performance.

The biggest problem is with music, though. If you simply switch straight over from settings that are effective for film and TV, the ForceField 3 tends to dominate proceedings, feeling sluggish and tending to come in slightly after the point when you really needed it. If you're happy to run different settings for music and movies, the effect can be improved, but the other woofers reviewed here aren't anything like as affected in this regard.

Specialised offering

As such, the ForceField3 is a slightly specialised offering. If you are in the market for a woofer that is going to augment your film and TV viewing and you won't be listening to music with it very often (or at all), this is an exceptional mid-priced performer with a usefully small footprint. It is not the most subtle device going, though, and is somewhat lacking in terms of musicality and poise. Not a true all-rounder, then, but still great fun.

SPECIFICATIONS

GOLDENEAR FORCEFIELD 3

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in long-throw 'high-output' fibre cone bass driver; 1 x 9in x 11in Quadratic Planar Infrasonic Radiator

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 18Hz-250Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 1,000W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 292(w) x 400(h) x 292(d)mm
WEIGHT: 12kg

CONNECTIONS: LFE input; speaker-level inputs and outputs

Taking control

Agile and authoritative, Quadral's beautifully built 10in offering has a musical bent



GERMAN BRAND QUADRAL has been selling in the UK for some years now and its range of technically innovative speakers is designed to be as comfortable in multichannel as they are in stereo, hence the need for dedicated subwoofers. The Qube 10 is one of three new arrivals.

As the name suggests, the Qube 10 makes use of a single downward-firing 10in driver. This is augmented by a single rear slot port. The thinking behind the slot design is to try and avoid any audible activity from the port while giving the same tuning as a cylindrical one.

Amplification comes from a 200W Class D amp, which is the least powerful here, but nothing about the Quadral's specifications suggest that it is in any way underpowered, as the reasonably large ported cabinet seems to be able to get the most out of the driver. Controls are reasonably comprehensive as the Quadral has line-level and high-level inputs, crossover and phase controls.

A switchable voltage means that if you're a bit of a globetrotter, this is the sub for you.

Like everything else I've ever seen by Quadral, the build is extremely solid and the quality of the lacquered finish is exceptional, with a deep shine and nothing in the way of visible imperfections. The brushed, Quadral-embazoned steel on the front is also a nice touch and if a subwoofer can ever be called attractive, this is probably it.

Stable boy

The Qube 10 is a slightly deceptive performer in that it never feels as powerful as it actually is. Much of this stems from how much control it exhibits. The cabinet is completely inert even when driven hard, which means that all you hear, essentially, is the driver.

With *The Impossible*, the Qube 10 doesn't match some of the other designs here for absolute depth and impact but the performance is detailed and fast. Yes, it has impressive extension, but there is a sense that it is a little unwilling to truly let rip when you need it to – it's very hard to provoke it into misbehaving. The true ferocity of the tsunami, therefore, isn't completely captured.

Detailing is good though – the Quadral can differentiate between very subtle changes in pitch and tone.

This refinement is equally present with broadcast TV and the sequence in *Elementary* is handled with the same control and clarity that it shows with films.

This agility and poise means that the Quadral loves music and didn't require any significant alteration to the settings to do so.

'Quadral's Qube 10 is a gorgeous chunk of electronics that should fit easily into most lounges'

The speed of the driver keeps bass happening at the right moment and the fine detail means that complex basslines are well handled. Once again, I got the slightest sense that the Quadral won't completely unleash its power and give you some real gut-rattling bass, but if this is the trade-off for a subwoofer that stays so unruffled, it will be a compromise that many people will accept.

The Quadral Qube 10 is a big step forward from any previous woofer I've seen from the brand, but manages to mirror the qualities that make its speakers so well received. It's a beautifully built chunk of electronics that should fit into most lounges, the performance is equally polished and if you are looking for an all-rounder to give you some useful extra low-end extension across music and movies, it is well worth checking out. Only the slight lack of absolute excitement counts against it.

SPECIFICATIONS

QUADRAL QUBE10

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in downward-firing long-stroke woofer

ENCLOSURE: Ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 22Hz-200Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 200W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 320(w) x 420(h) x 390(d)mm

WEIGHT: 16.5kg

CONNECTIONS: LFE input; speaker-level inputs and outputs

Going its own way

The T-7 uses a Class A/B amp and offers some unusual hookup options. Oh, and it sounds good



REL ACOUSTICS HAS been at the business of subwoofers for a very long time and has a slightly different set of design priorities to many other brands. RELs were originally all about giving a bit of low-end shove to your stereo system before 'home cinema' was a gleam in Dolby's eye. To this end, the T-7 is

'The REL T-7 has a superb balance of speed, agility and depth – this a very complete woofer'

a somewhat different proposition to the other three subs in our roundup.

Firstly, the REL T-7 is the only woofer here to make use of a Class A/B amplifier, which means a good portion of the rear panel is given over to a heatsink. Secondly, although the REL is fitted with an LFE and separate low-level input, the company chucks in a distinctive high-level Neutrik Speakon socket. Both are

fitted with a volume control to allow them to be used simultaneously, which is the brand's suggestion for optimum performance, although you can just employ the traditional LFE output from your AVR. The T-7 is also fitted with crossover and phase controls.

Like the GoldenEar ForceField 3, the REL makes use of a downward-firing 8in driver. And, like the GoldenEar, the REL uses a passive radiator instead of a bass port for cabinet tuning. However, here this takes the form of a conventional 10in driver, which is ironically the one that's visible.

The T-7 is small but feels extremely solid and the finish is good. The four feet and top-plate logo are milled aluminium; the exterior makes use of nine coats of hand-sanded lacquer. Like the Quadral, the REL feels like a piece of furniture as much as it does audio equipment.

Similarly sumptuous

In fact, the T-7's performance is similar to the Quadral Qube 10 in a number of ways. This is a subwoofer with excellent integration at the handover to the speakers, and the overall

performance is never anything less than composed, and free of any harshness or lack of control. At the same time, the T-7 manages to conjure more aggression and excitement when it's required. This means that the pivotal sequence in *The Impossible* has both detail and control, and some of the savagery that you might expect a giant tidal wave to deliver. And, while it has to give ground to the GoldenEar and, to a lesser extent, the SVS SB12-NSD in terms of absolute extension, the T-7 feels more assured than either.

With television material, the REL produces an equally composed performance with just the right amount of clout. The pacemaker sequence in *Elementary* is beautifully handled, with the T-7 really tracking the bass tone and helping build the tension.

Part of the reason why REL's £650 woofer is so effective in these instances is the agility that it possesses. There is almost no sense of overhang or bloat to its performance, which greatly aids the sense of realism. This also means that the T-7 is the best of the pack for music use: even when the high-level input isn't used in the interests of a fair test, the REL has a speed, agility and depth that the other group's contenders simply don't combine with the same balance.

Very complete

The end result is that the T-7 is a very complete subwoofer. It does trade the last few per cent of depth and slam for greater all-round ability, and if you happen to live on a diet of braindead blockbusters you might find that you want a bit more oomph. Yet to live with every day, and use across a wide variety of material, the REL takes a good deal of beating and has a great deal to offer. Even the manual is excellent...

SPECIFICATIONS

REL T-7

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in downward-firing long-stroke woofer; 1 x 10in passive radiator
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: From 30Hz (-6dB)
ON BOARD POWER: 200W Class A/B
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 305(w) x 349(h) x 349(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15.4kg
CONNECTIONS: LFE input; low-level input; Neutrik Speakon high-level input

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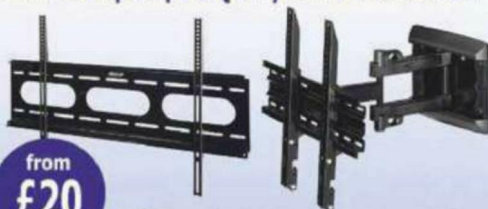
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Feel the fear

This sub's 12in driver should help it deliver a heavy-weight performance



SV Sound (SVS) was a pioneer in the field of direct sales in its native US and carved out a solid reputation for producing no-nonsense designs that punched well above their price point. Initially, it mainly offered cylindrical types, which we've previously likened to giant-sized scratching posts, but more recently the designs have also included more conventional boxes, like the SB12-NSD reviewed here.

SVS describes the SB12-NSD as a compact subwoofer and compared to some of its lineup it almost certainly is, but at the same time this is comfortably the largest subwoofer in our group test. It's a sealed design and unlike the GoldenEar ForceField 3 or REL T-7 doesn't make use of a passive radiator for additional cone area. Instead, the SVS employs a larger driver – a 12in aluminium type with a composite dust cap. This is forward-firing and protected by a huge – and somewhat unattractive – metal grille. Indeed, the SB12-NSD is no oil painting overall. While it feels extremely sturdy (weighing nearly 16kg), the charcoal finish of our review sample feels a bit austere next

'This is a talented bass beast that marries impressive weight with considerable control and finesse'

to the others, and, combined with the large size, this sub might prove difficult to squirrel away. A gloss finish is available for a little more money, though.

Sledge hammer

With 400W on tap from a 'Sledge' (effectively a Class D) amp, the SVS is only outmuscled in that regard by the GoldenEar ForceField 3. It's also rather sophisticated. Although the control options are similar to the other subs, the SVS's controls are digital and it makes use of a DSP to control some aspects of the output, although these can't be adjusted by the user. The only slight feature omission is the lack of high-level input.

The SVS puts in a performance that shows why the brand is highly regarded and is also a fairly compelling argument for using a larger driver. With the test sequence in *The Impossible*, the SVS challenges the GoldenEar for low-end extension and ferocity – and while the GoldenEar is somewhat hindered by its uncontrolled nature, the SVS is fast, detailed and extremely accurate. There is very little sense of the cabinet doing anything other than holding the vitals in place.

This agility and energy carries over to broadcast TV and the SVS proves to be a very capable device for day-to-day viewing. Integration at the higher frequencies is seamless and despite its size the SB12-NSD is capable of impressive subtlety. The only catch with the performance is that there is a strangely 'on/off' nature to certain parts of the SVS's frequency response. Where the REL and Quadral have meaningful output, the SVS seems to be rather less forthcoming. Quite why this might be is hard to say, but it is possible that the DSP control is sometimes a little too much of a good thing.

With music material the SVS is quick and punchy and manages to keep up with the very agile REL. The tight, deep bass that it generates with films is equally welcome here – this is a capable all-rounder.

Overall, the SB12-NSD is a talented bass beast that marries impressive weight with control and finesse – It doesn't seem fazed by much you can throw at it. The slightly rugged aesthetic and large size do mean that you will need a reasonable amount of space to accommodate it, though, and it isn't as domestically friendly as some of the designs here. But some will prefer performance over looks.

SPECIFICATIONS

SVS SB12-NSD

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in forward-firing driver

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 23Hz-270Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 400W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 361(w) x 371(h) x 371(d)mm

WEIGHT: 15.9kg

CONNECTIONS: Low-level inputs; low level output; high-level output

Final standings

RUNNING A HOME cinema system without a subwoofer is tantamount to AV treason. One bass box is essential and adding a few more doesn't hurt, either, which is why affordable models like our grouptest quartet are so appealing – find a £600 woofer that you like and it won't break the bank to bring another into your speaker array. However, a truly great sub doesn't just add vicious slam to cinematic explosions, it needs to be fast, agile and musical, too. And it helps if it manages to do all that with a touch of design style...

ALL FOUR OF these woofers have attributes that may make them the ideal design for you depending on how much or little you want them to do. If you are looking for a sub solely to rearrange your internal organs during action films, the GoldenEar ForceField 3 takes some beating. It isn't subtle and cannot be considered a true all-rounder, but it's a lot of fun nevertheless.

Quadral's Qube 10, on the other hand, is often a little too self-effacing for its own good. Yet there is little arguing with the refinement and detail that it possesses, and the fact that it is engineered like a Swiss watch. There's also no arguing with the keen pricing – it's affordability can't be discounted.

Separating the SVS SB12-NSD and the REL Acoustics T-7 is a hard task. In some ways, the

SB12 is the most complete performer here. It nearly matches the GoldenEar for impact and the REL for musicality, and the speed and agility that it goes about producing bass is extremely impressive. Yet the relatively prosaic looks and its large size means that some people might be turned off.

Shining example

This is where the REL T-7 shines. It cannot quite match the SB12-NSD for bass depth but it comes closer than you might expect, while offering top-notch musical prowess. And it does this while taking up a commendably small amount of space, offering a build and finish that is unlikely to offend, and giving tweekers some interesting connection possibilities. That's why it's our winner ■

MAKE IT A LARGE ONE



Bigger brothers: Each of the brands here offer larger, more potent subwoofers for those with higher budgets, in particular SVS and REL. The former has a 10-strong product stable that includes a trio of 'tower models' – including the flagship 13.5in-driver PC13 Ultra, pictured – and an assortment of more traditional sealed and ported

designs. REL, meanwhile, offers subs from the entry-level 6.5in T-Zero, through its step-up R series, to the range-topping G series 'Gibraltar' subs (but you'll need over £3,300 to bag the astonishing 12in G1).

GoldenEar is a relative newcomer and currently only offers subwoofers under the ForceField banner (in fact, it only makes three lineups of loudspeakers). The ForceField 3 reviewed here is outgunned by, you've guessed it, the ForceField 4 and 5, which house 10in and 12in drivers respectively, and offer even more onboard power. No sign yet of the ForceField 5 on sale in the UK, though. Quadral, meanwhile, sells a wide range of loudspeakers, but mainly partners them with iterations of the Qube lineup to create 5.1 arrays. Here, the Qube 12 (which uses a 12in driver) is the flagship product – although its sub-brand, Aurum, packs the more expensive (but also 12in) Orkus woofer.

HCC VERDICT



GoldenEar ForceField 3

→ £550 Approx
→ www.karma-av.co.uk
→ Tel: 01423 358846

HIGHS: Immense low-end extension and power; usefully compact and solidly built

LOWS: Can move around; some lack of fine detail and agility with music; quirky shape...

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Quadral Qube 10

→ £525 Approx
→ www.quadralgb-ie.co.uk
→ Tel: 01785 748 446

HIGHS: Controlled, detailed and civilised performance; excellent build quality; handsome design; affordable

LOWS: Slight lack of low-end extension and sense of excitement; fairly large enclosure

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



REL Acoustics T-7

→ £650 Approx
→ <http://rel.net>
→ Tel: 01656 768 777

HIGHS: Cohesive, detailed and lively performance; small footprint; excellent build and aesthetics; simultaneous high-/low-level hookup

LOWS: Some limits to its absolute depth; quite expensive

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



SVS SB12-NSD

→ £650 Approx
→ www.karma-av.co.uk
→ Tel: 01423 358846

HIGHS: Impressive low end with plenty of detail; works well with music material; well-specified; solid construction

LOWS: Slightly 'on/off' performance; prosaic appearance; fairly expensive

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Onkyo's mid-ranger prepares for war

The TX-NR626 brings integrated Bluetooth and Wi-Fi hookup to the £500 AVR battle – but **Danny Phillips** still finds a few chinks in its armour

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
7.2-channel
AV receiver

POSITION:
Midrange model
between TX-NR525
and TX-NR727

PEERS:
Yamaha RX-V675;
Pioneer VSX-923;
Denon AVR-X2000

ONKYO'S SUCCESS IN the AVR market stems from its ability to hit the sweet spot between value and performance, and this 7.2-channel model looks to offer more of the same with a load of features and a nice price.

Design-wise, it's business as usual. The TX-NR626's nondescript silver box (also available in black) is nigh-on identical to last year's TX-NR616. It lacks the back-breaking heft of the TX-NR818, but its firmly-bolted aluminium panels make bodywork robust.

A large LED display dominates the front panel, imparting information clearly (and scrolling where necessary). There's a bevy of buttons and dials that you can only see up close, alongside AV inputs and a USB port, which lets you play music from USB memory drives but not Apple devices.

The healthy selection of sockets on the back should keep you going for years to come. There are six 3D-ready HDMI inputs, one of which also supports Mobile High-Definition Link (MHL), plus two ARC-compatible outputs.

These are backed up by three digital inputs (two coaxial, one optical), five analogue audio inputs, composite and component video ports, plus powered and line-level outputs for feeding sound to a second room.

The TX-NR626's feature list is superb for the money. Built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth are the two key additions to the spec sheet, both appearing for the first time on an Onkyo amp. They make it easier than ever to stream music without having to fork out for optional dongles. There's an Ethernet port if you prefer the stability of a wired connection.

You can also take advantage of built-in music streaming services – Spotify, AUPEO!, Last.fm, Simfy, MP3tunes and Tunein radio – plus DLNA certification means you can stream your own music from PCs, NAS drives, smartphones and tablets.

The Onkyo plays a pleasing range of audio formats, including MP3, WMA (Lossless and regular), FLAC, WAV, Ogg Vorbis, AAC, Apple Lossless, LPCM and DSD. There's also 4K



2012's handset returns – that's no bad thing

pass-through and upscaling courtesy of Marvell's Qdeo technology, myriad sound modes and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, which spreads the soundstage vertically.

So far so good, but there are gaps in the spec sheet, the most significant being AirPlay. Coupled with the lack of iPod support via USB, Apple devotees might be tempted to look at Denon and Yamaha's AirPlay-capable models. THX certification is the other high-profile omission, which is reserved for the step-up TX-NR727.

The simple onscreen menu system makes operation a cinch. The Home screen lays five coloured icons over a black background, providing quick access to the main functions

'As we've come to expect, the Onkyo has a well-organised, dynamic and cohesive performance'

and setup menu. Here, the clear layout makes sense of the detailed AV tweaks, which include speaker configuration tools and adjustments for Dolby, DTS and Audyssey modes. Or you can let Audyssey MultEQ massage the sound for you – plug the supplied mic into Onkyo's belly and the automated system takes readings from up to six positions, and sets EQ, distances and levels accordingly. After running it I checked the results. The readings were surprisingly accurate and I was more than happy with how it sounded, although the subwoofer still needed some TLC.

Amongst the birds and the bees...

Network setup proved equally straightforward. Wi-Fi access points scanned quickly and connected without fuss, even in my garden cinema room where coverage is often patchy. I had no trouble finding files on networked laptops, and the Onkyo streamed music via Bluetooth and Wi-Fi with only the occasional drop-out.

Plenty of analogue and digital hookups here



The supplied remote is the same as last year but you won't hear me complaining. The layout is tidy and thoughtful, with clearly-labelled input keys at the top and a perfectly-placed direction pad for navigating menus. But where's the dedicated Bluetooth button? You have to select it from the front-panel or the onscreen menu. Grr.

More adventurous users can control the TX-NR626 using Onkyo's Remote 2 app on their Android or iOS device.

Getting down to the nitty gritty of movie-viewing, the TX-NR626 is an impressive performer that revels in the cut and thrust of a vigorous action scene – in this case the train crash at the start of *Super 8* [how many times have you seen that now? Ed].

From the moment the white van collides with the train, the Onkyo demonstrates its mastery of the multichannel soundstage – as carriages fly through the air, whooshing effects are rapidly and smoothly flung across the room, metal panels ping and clang from rear speakers with precision, while explosions have satisfying weight and punch.

Then, when the alien blasts the train carriage door high into the air, the camera angle changes and the Onkyo confidently shifts the direction of the sound from front speakers to back.

It's a well-organised, dynamic and cohesive performance, the sort I've come to expect from Onkyo's power-pushers. It handles delicate sounds with great agility and can cut from noisy to silent without significant overhang – as evidenced by the sudden silence as the door flips though the air. That's a real bonus if you love tension and shocks.

But the TX-NR626 can be a brutal listen. Watching this scene with the volume up high is akin to going ten rounds with Karl Froch with your hands tied behind your back. Part of the reason for this is a slight harshness to mid and high frequencies that occasionally took the edge off my enjoyment.

However, while the TX-NR626 isn't quite the unqualified success of past Onkyo receivers in terms of performance, it's still mightily impressive – not least because it offers an outstanding range of features at an attractive price ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Onkyo's GUI is an improvement on the bland interfaces of yesteryear, with an icon-based Home screen (which overlays the HDMI input) as your jumping off point. Setup menus are easy to navigate

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 160W (6 ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2
AV INPUTS: Yes. 5 x composite; 3 x digital audio (1 x optical and 2 x coaxial)
HDMI: Yes. 6 x inputs; 2 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 1-in, 1-out
DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 173.5(d) x 328(h)mm
WEIGHT: 10kg
ALSO FEATURING: Qdeo video processing; built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth; Mobile High-Definition Link; DLNA; internet music and radio services; MP3, WMA, FLAC, WAV, Ogg Vorbis, AAC, ALAC, DSD, LPCM playback; InstaPrevue; Phase Matching Bass Boost; Audyssey MultEQ, Dynamic EQ and Dynamic Volume; remote app for Android and iOS; Ethernet and USB ports; TI Burr-Brown 192kHz/24-bit DACs

HCC VERDICT



Onkyo TX-NR626

→ £500 Approx → www.onkyo.co.uk

→ Tel: 01628 473350

HIGHS: Powerful, well organised sound; extensive features; easy to use; built-in Bluetooth and Wi-Fi

LOWS: No AirPlay; hard edge to mids and highs; no Bluetooth button on remote

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Get connected for less

There's no longer a price premium tied to internet-streaming Smart screens – but that doesn't mean they're all created equal when it comes to AV. **Steve May** reports

THE ENTRY-LEVEL SMART

3DTV sector is shaping up to be the hottest battleground for mass-market TVs. This year we're seeing a wave of well-tooled tellies that appear to give away nothing to their more expensive brethren. You, dear buyer, are getting more tech than ever for your money. Typical of this value charge is the 42LA690V from LG. £900 (or less) will get you a 42-incher with high-quality Smart functionality and 3D-vision.

Connectivity is certainly broad. The set offers three HDMI, one of which is MHL (Mobile High Definition Link)-enabled for smartphones, plus a trio of USBs, Scart, component and composite video plus Ethernet. Wi-Fi is ensconced. The TV comes with two controllers, a standard clicker and LG's cursor-based Magic Remote. It also supports NFC and MiraCast for hooking up mobile devices wirelessly.

There's been no big visual change to LG's Smart portal this year, and it remains well-stocked with IPTV content, including BBC iPlayer, LoveFilm, Netflix, Blinkbox, YouTube, Knowhow Movies, Napster and (for culture vultures) the Berlin Philharmoniker; there are also dedicated Game World and 3D World

areas. Video file support is comparably comprehensive. The TV spoons with all key codecs and wrappers, including WMV, AVI, MKV, MOV and MPEG. MP3s play back with album art.

So what's the catch? As it transpires, the one area where LG has cut corners is picture

processing. This budget panel offers only basic TruMotion manipulation, which means it can't retain motion clarity much beyond 800 lines. Black level, while not panther-tastic, is solid enough; dark scenes are delivered without undue noise and there's

tangible shadow detail.

The visually demanding Troll BBQ sequence from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Blu-ray) appears crisp and dynamic, although the campfire fight sequence highlights motion blur.

The screen does at least manage to avoid the crushed blacks and high contrast which have typified LG sets in the past. Colours are luminous, with reds glowing toward orange, but this vibrancy isn't unattractive. LED backlight consistency is a smidge uneven, but on a TV this size that's not problematic.

This set's Passive 3D performance is entertaining but directional. You have to view square-on and the sweet spot for crosstalk-free stereography is limited. The TV can also depth-convert 2D sources into 3D (although we're still waiting on a compelling reason to do this). Four pairs of 3D glasses and two pairs of Dual Play eyewear, used to simultaneously display split-screen games, are supplied.

Audio quality is surprisingly robust, with a decent mid-range that promotes vocal clarity. A woofer on the rear adds depth, and there's plenty of welly available for casual film viewing.

Formidable feature count

Overall, the 42LA690V is a good-value flatscreen with a formidable feature spec. You'll need to hunt higher up the food chain for better image clarity, but there's no quibbling with the generous applications and glam aesthetics. If you're looking for a feature-rich 42in panel, it's well worth an audition ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive, with six pairs of glasses (two Dual Play) supplied
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, DVB-S2
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; Scart; component; composite; stereo phono; coaxial digital audio; headphone jack; Ethernet; 3 x USB; CI slot
SOUND: 2 x 12W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 951(w) x 564(h) x 34.5(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 12.2kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB/DLNA multimedia playback; NFC Tag On; MiraCast, Smart Portal with streaming internet TV services; Magic Remote

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Mid-range
Smart 3D LED TV

POSITION:
One of 73(!) current
LG sets, below
the 790 and
890 models

PEERS:
Panasonic
TX-L42ET60;
Sony KDL-42W653A

HCC VERDICT

LG 42LA690V

→ £900 Approx → www.lg.com/uk
 → Tel: 0844 847 5454

HIGHS: Well-built and attractive; superior online portal; mobile smart interactivity

LOWS: Poor motion resolution; Passive 3D proves very directional

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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42" TX-L42DT65B £1199

FT60 Full HD 3D LED LCD TV

47" TX-L47FT60B £1199
42" TX-L42FT60B £999



ET60 Full HD 3D LED LCD TV

55" TX-L55ET60B £1299
50" TX-L50ET60B £1049
47" TX-L47ET60B £899
42" TX-L42ET60B £699

E6/X6/XM6/B6 LCD/LED TV

50" TX-L50E6B £899
42" TX-L42E6B £599
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32" TX-L32E6B £399
24" TX-L24X6B £349
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Standard | MultiRegion

DMP-BD79EB-K £79 | £169
DMP-BDT120EB £99 | £199
DMP-BDT130EB £99 | £199
DMP-BDT230EB £149 | £249
DMP-BDT320EB £149 | £249
DMP-BDT330EB £199 | £319
DMP-BDT500EB £269 | £369

Blu-ray & HDD Twin-tuner Recorder

Standard | MultiRegion

DMR-PWT530EB £319 | £419

Blu-ray HD Recorder & HDD Twin-tuner Recorder

DMR-BWT735EB £499 | N/A

Blu-ray Home Cinema System

Standard | MultiRegion

SC-BTT100EB-K £199 | £299
SC-BTT400EB-K £259 | £359
SC-BTT500EB-S £349 | £449
SC-BTT460EB-K £349 | £449
SC-BTT230EB-S £449 | £549
SC-BTT560EB-S £499 | £599
SC-BTT880EB-S £649 | £749

SOUNDBAR EQUIPMENT

SC-HTB65EB-K/S £199
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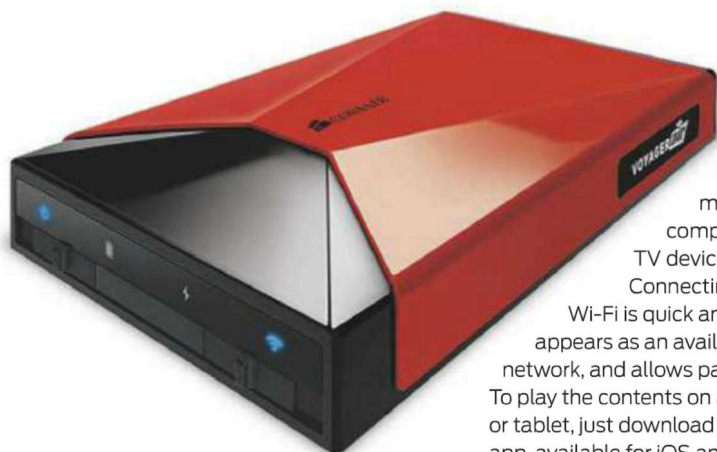
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A1114 (DLP) £39.99

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A1121 (IR/RF) £49.99
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Set your media free

The Voyager Air is a portable Wi-Fi-enabled hard drive with Ethernet. Is this the perfect partner for smartphones and tablets, wonders **Steve May**?



IN OUR NEW networked entertainment era, storing movies, TV shows and music on a NAS is a necessity rather than a geeky indulgence. But a fat hard drive locked to your network doesn't really fly when you also want to view your stuff on mobile devices when out and about. Enter the Voyager Air from Corsair.

This mobile storage device is just as happy disgorging content as a Wi-Fi hotspot as it is when plumbed into a LAN via Ethernet.

The diminutive drive is well built and looks smart with its distinctive red plastic wrap (boring black is also available). It ships with a carry pouch, DC power cable and wall wart, USB 3.0 lead and car adapter. The unit itself offers Gigabit LAN Ethernet and 2.4GHz 802.11n Wi-Fi, along with USB 3.0 connectivity (USB 2.0-compatible). Keeping things mobile is a large-capacity Lithium Ion battery which runs for upwards of seven hours when charged. The Voyager Air is available both as a 500GB drive and the 1TB iteration auditioned here.

Operation is straightforward. The front of the drive has slider switches for power and activating Wi-Fi. The 1TB NTFS drive is

formatted for use with a PC, but Mac fans can reformat it to HFS+, making it compatible with Time Machine for backups.

On a home network, when connected by Ethernet, the Voyager Air can be mapped as a network drive. However, it doesn't

ship with any DLNA media server application onboard, which makes it a poor companion for Smart TV devices.

Connecting to the Voyager via Wi-Fi is quick and painless. The drive appears as an available, open, wireless network, and allows password-free access. To play the contents on a smartphone or tablet, just download the Voyager Air app, available for iOS and Android; this automatically connects once you've signed into the Voyager Air's Wi-Fi hotspot. You can then access the contents directly, download material from the drive, or upload new files.

Multi-talented

The key attraction of the Voyager Air is that this single shared drive can function both as a primary networked storage device, for regular file storage and back-up, or as a gregarious mobile NAS feeding multiple devices. Use it to dispense movies or music to multiple passengers when on a road trip, a content vault when visiting friends, or as a massive repository containing hundreds of movies for your own travel use.

There are limitations, though. As a NAS, the Voyager Air presents a plain face to the wider world. With no onboard DLNA media server or other apps, a large number of living room Smart devices simply will not see it. During our audition, the network-savvy Panasonic TX-P60ZT65 TV couldn't spot it when on the same wired network as other NAS devices, although a WD Live media player identified it as a Samba share and allowed access. Embedded DLNA functionality would significantly enhance its overall usability. Corsair says it is planning a DLNA firmware update later this year. The Voyager Air app itself features an unfussy interface and has limited file support, although you can specify third-party media playback packages to handle file duties.

Overall, the Voyager Air is a versatile media storage option, albeit with some foibles. Connecting the drive via USB turns off the Wi-Fi radio, and you can't use it as a Wi-Fi

access point for an Ethernet-connected LAN. On the plus side, it'll serve up to eight mobile devices simultaneously, five when streaming HD content. All it really needs to make it indispensable is a DLNA media server application. That firmware update can't come soon enough ■

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. 1TB (a 500GB version is also available)

CONNECTIONS: USB 3.0; Gigabit Ethernet

DIMENSIONS: 84(w) x 25(h) x 140(d)mm

WEIGHT: 330g

FEATURES: Integrated 802.11 b/g/n Wi-Fi; Gigabit Ethernet connection, seven-hour rechargeable Lithium Ion battery; car adapter; USB 2.0-compatible; Voyager Air app for Android and iOS

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Wi-Fi-enabled mobile NAS drive

POSITION: Above Corsair's range of USB Flash drives

PEERS: PQ1 Airbank 6W31; Maxell Airstash

HCC VERDICT

Voyager Air

→ £180 Approx → www.corsair.com

HIGHS: Dual network NAS and mobile wireless storage is a winner; smooth HD wireless streaming; simple to set up

LOWS: No DLNA compliant media server onboard; can't function wirelessly when connected over USB

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Home cinema on a diet

Harman Kardon's top-flight 2.1 package exudes design class and sounds punchy, but **Adrian Justins** finds himself hankering for more speakers



GREAT CARE HAS clearly been lavished on the BDS-477's exterior. This is a swish-looking piece of kit, especially in the white version, and it comes with an amazing remote that manages to be busier than the M25 on a wet Monday morning and yet looks as minimalist as the main unit (and has tiny, illegible labels). The subwoofer and satellites are reassuringly solid and all moving parts are beautifully engineered. Socketry is generous with no shortage of digital and analogue inputs.

Things go downhill a tad when you switch the unit on and start to use it. It's not complicated, but the user interface is bereft of colour and icons, and the Smart TV menu consists of just two dishes – YouTube and Picasa. At least multimedia matters extend to DLNA, AirPlay, Bluetooth and USB streaming (but sadly it can't handle FLAC files).

Calibration is a cinch thanks to the EzSet/EQ system.

Picture-wise, the BDS-477 does little wrong. The explorers in the cave in *Prometheus* (BD) are crystal clear, as is the gloomy background. Overall, clarity is good, as is contrast, and colours are vibrant and realistic.

CGI material such as *The Rise Of The Guardians* looks stunning, and this Blu-ray disc also provides an excellent test for the 2.1 system, where three speakers have to try and deliver the zesty excitement usually created in a multichannel configuration thanks to an outstanding Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack.

In themselves, the Sat-60s are great little speakers but it's hard not to feel that the BDS-477 is a few satellites short of an AV picnic, with discrete effects that normally zip around multichannel rears or sides greatly lacking in impact. Dialogue is rich and resonant but the scrapes of Jack Frost's hook in the ice and the fairies' fluttering wings seem constrained and a little lifeless. Switching from stereo to either of the Dolby virtual surround modes boosts matters somewhat.

The 200W subwoofer is an aggressive beast with an astonishing level of power, such that the vibrating carriage in the immediate aftermath of *Super 8*'s train wreck positively throws in a free foot massage. One senses that the addition of some surround channels and a dedicated centre would provide a better solution to its over-dominance rather than having to reduce the sub's gain. With music material the tonal balance is a much better fit.

Overall, the BDS-477 is a mixed bag. It looks superb and is capable of serving up top-notch acoustics but its dull interface and variable handling of surround sound movies renders it more suitable for a second room setup ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; HDMI output; component video input; Ethernet; 2 x optical digital audio inputs; coaxial digital audio input; subwoofer output; subwoofer trigger connector; remote IR in; 2 x stereo phono inputs; stereo phono output; FM antenna; USB; 2 x stereo speaker terminals
SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No
DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes
CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 2 x 65W plus 200W subwoofer
DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 80(h) x 400(w) x 301(d)mm
WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 3.1kg
FEATURES: EzSet/EQ calibration; 2 x 3in mid-range drivers, 1 x 1in tweeter in each Sat-60 enclosure; 8in subwoofer; Dolby Digital, Dolby Digital Plus, DTS Digital decoding; YouTube; Picasa; DLNA, Bluetooth and AirPlay streaming; USB flash memory playback: JPEG, GIF, PNG, MP3, WMA, AAC, AVI, AVCHD, MPEG-1, MPEG-2; iOS and Android control app

HCC VERDICT

Harman Kardon BDS-477

→ £1,100 Approx → <http://uk.harmankardon.com>

→ Tel: 01707 278113

HIGHS: Stylish design; excellent connectivity; top-notch pictures; beautifully engineered
LOWS: Illegible buttons on remote control; outdated menu system; overbearing sub

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-end 2.1
all-in-one system

POSITION:
Top-specced
2.1 system in a
stable of four

PEERS:
Sony BDV-NF720;
Bose Lifestyle 235;
Pioneer BCS-SB626

It's a kind of magic

This slender, £150 Blu-ray player wants to cast its spell over **Mark Craven**

LG'S NET-CONNECTED BD deck arrived too late to challenge its Sony, Panasonic and Pioneer rivals in last issue's budget Blu-ray player roundup, but it's safe to say it would have slotted in comfortably with the rest of them – like its £150 shelf-mates, it's a pleasing slab of silicon without offering true levels of awesomeness.

Seemingly designed with one eye on the AV Limbo Championships, it measures less than 4cm high, and sports a rather natty two-tier chassis – in between this is the slot-loading disc tray, while the lip of the bottom half houses (touch-sensitive) basic controls. Connectivity is run-of-the-mill – you get an HDMI output, USB port, Ethernet jack, coaxial digital audio out and nothing else.

Wi-Fi is integrated, providing access to LG's Smart hub and home media streaming – the user interface is the brand's trademark colour-strewn collage of quirky, hi-res icons, and is somewhat refreshing. You'll need to



delve into the Settings sub-menu to stop it outputting BD audio as stereo by default.

With Blu-rays (including 3D platters), the BP730 offers clear, detailed Full HD imagery with realistic tones, which is good as there are no player-based picture tweaks available.

Conjuring up control

The LG has two tricks up its sleeve that may appeal. One is its Magic Remote handset – this eschews many of the buttons still cluttering up rivals' zappers in favour of the bare essentials, and chucks in a motion-sensitive onscreen cursor. Change the speed setting to 'slow' and it's actually quite usable.

The player uses a slot-loading disc tray

The second is Private Sound Mode, where audio is sent via Wi-Fi to your phone or tablet while video continues to your TV or AVR. Plug in your mobile device's headphones and late-night listening problems are solved! ■

HCC VERDICT

LG BP730 → £150

Overall ★★★★★

PHILIPS HTL5120 → Approx £250

Affordable and assured

It doesn't come with a separate sub, but this curvy 'bar' still performs, says **Danny Phillips**

SOUNDBARS ARE CURRENTLY home cinema's hero products and the HTL5120 is a fine example of the genre.

The design is more luxurious than the price tag suggests, with silky black cloth, brushed silver panels and curvy gloss-black ports at both ends. It can be installed on the wall or tabletop, with an orientation sensor switching the sound to suit its position.

Connections are generous, with two HDMI v1.4 inputs and an ARC-ready output, plus optical, coaxial, analogue stereo and 3.5mm inputs. There's no USB port, but built-in

Bluetooth provides easy music streaming from phones and laptops. On-board decoding covers Dolby Digital and DTS but not HD audio.

In action the HTL5120 sounds great. With 120W in the tank it floods the room with rich, muscular sound, lending weight and authority to *The Hobbit...*'s DTS track. The breathtaking prologue is handled with a silky, smooth quality; high frequencies shimmer and sparkle as Smaug wreaks havoc

in Erebor – the chink of gold and the rustle of trees sit crisply above the dragon's tight thumping footsteps and the cries of terrified dwarves. Even without an outboard sub, the Philips' tightly-integrated bass lends depth and doesn't muddy the sound. Crank up the volume and the sound doesn't distort either – explosions and crashes are aggressive but always well controlled.

A Virtual Surround Sound mode adds a little extra width to scenes like the rain-strewn Stone Giants battle, but surround sound it is not – stick with regular stereo to enjoy this great-value 'bar' ■



Handily, the Philips offers twin HDMI inputs

HCC VERDICT

Philips HTL5120 → £250

Overall ★★★★★

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Accessorize me!

Desktop speakers

You have high-quality audio in your cinema room, but make do with the lifeless speakers built into your PC. **Adrian Justins** tests four solutions to your problem

MY DESKTOP COMPUTER costs over £1,000 (yes, I'm one of the mugs who can't break out of Apple's clutches) and has superb picture quality. It's good enough to watch hi-def movies from Netflix and programmes from BBC iPlayer, and I'm not averse to enjoying the odd tune or two whilst I bash away at the keyboard. But my iMac, like most computers, has sonics that are weedier than a wild meadow. Therefore, investing in a decent set of desktop speakers is essential for transforming your aural enjoyment for those times when you're stuck in (or have escaped to) the study.

Configuration options are diverse, with 5.1, 2.1, stereo and wireless speaker docks all available, some for as low as £20. Here, we've rounded up four pairs of stereo speakers priced

between £200 and £400, each of which should have enough low-end grunt to render a separate sub unnecessary and provide sufficient quality to deliver the kind of sonic accompaniment *HCC* readers expect.

'Investing in a decent set of desktop speakers is essential for transforming your aural enjoyment'

Testing times

For my auditions, I used the speakers with a host of movies and dramas, including *Iron Man 2* on Netflix and *Ice Age Giants* on the BBC iPlayer, and scores of songs via my iTunes library and CD collection, including The Killers and Benjamin Britten. Which brand comes out on top? Read on...

Approx £200 → www.bose.co.uk

Bose Companion 20

Affordable, quirky and nicely potent

A COMBINATION OF plastic body and metallic grille, the 22cm high and 9cm wide Bose speakers have a substantial presence on your desktop, but the slight tilt gives a touch of class to their otherwise brash appearance.

Bose is always sketchy on the tech specs of its kit, but will reveal that each speaker has one 2.75in driver. As with all these models, it's the right speaker that takes on connection duties, here including a 12V input, 3.5mm line-in and left speaker output. There is no digital input offered, but there is a socket for connection to what's called a control pod, which is Bose's alternative to onboard buttons and a remote control. The circular pod's top surface provides a touch-sensitive means of muting the Companion 20 and for disengaging the auto standby function. The rim is a beautifully engineered volume dial that only requires a light touch and goes from min to max in just 180 degrees. On the front is a headphone jack and 3.5mm aux input, which

mixes with the computer audio and means you can hear music from an MP3 player without muting computer alerts.

Beefy sound

The Companion 20s have an incredibly beefy sound with a bass output that on occasion is too dominant. The mid-range of The Killers' *Losing Touch* is a bit on the muddy side but overall these produce an incredible amount of power for their size; with Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* some of the finer details get lost but *Ice Age Giants'* vocal commentary is tight and listenable. Furthermore, the Bose speakers deliver movie soundtracks with superb impact, enhanced by their terrific energy.

So: no Bluetooth here, but beyond that these are a decent, well-priced, offering.



A tethered remote? Actually, it's quite a neat idea

HCC VERDICT

Bose Companion 20 → £200

Overall ★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins MM-1

These elderly speakers still cut the mustard

THE MM-1 HAS been kicking around for a few years now but Bowers & Wilkins seems to have little cause to retire it. The question is, is it really worth the £400 premium it commands? In terms of looks, it has that definitive, classy and minimalist B&W design, along with the smallest footprint (10cm x 10cm) in this group. Each speaker has two 18W amps driving a 3in woofer and a 1in tweeter, the latter of which is derived from B&W's renowned Nautilus speaker. As usual, left is slave to right, and eschewing the analogue 3.5mm line-in, the preferred computer connection is by proprietary USB cable, which delivers digitally to the MM-1 and allows volume and transport control of iTunes using the slick pebble of a remote.

A single LED on the right speaker glows different colours according to its status, whilst

a headphone jack also features on the rear of this speaker. Controls on the metallic central band for power and volume are the only operational flaw, as they just push the speaker over unless you grab it with your other hand. The right speaker also runs hot enough to fry an egg on its top. Probably.

Convincing clarity

Performance is excellent with the highest level of clarity and most convincing tonal balance in this roundup. The Killers' *Losing Touch* feels smooth with vocals, percussion and guitars all working in effortless harmony, the bass in OMD's *Maid of Orleans* is nice and full, and Britten's classical work builds unfalteringly to



its crescendo. Meanwhile, the dialogue in *Iron Man 2* comes through warm and doesn't screech or clip – indeed, these pricey speakers can go loud without losing control.

HCC VERDICT

Bowers & Wilkins MM-1 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

Approx £250 → www.rothaudio.co.uk

Roth OLi POWA-5

We're gonna need a bigger desk...

IT WOULD TAKE a sizeable desk to accommodate a pair of the 20cm-deep POWA-5s, which are actually bookshelf speakers. But placement flexibility, thanks to some peerless connectivity and a 3m speaker cable, is the reason for their inclusion. The right speaker also has a wireless Bluetooth option, complemented by two optical inputs, stereo phono, a 3.5mm line input, subwoofer output and dual USB inputs, both of which can charge an iPod or similar. Inside is an 80W Class D amp; both speakers have one 5in woofer and a 1in tweeter. The front of the right model has a plastic volume control knob, with a remote control also provided for more complex duties including source selection and bass and treble management.

In use, the OLi POWA-5 proves that size isn't everything, surprisingly failing to

outperform any of the more diminutive rivals in terms of power and impact. Yes, there's a real



punchiness to things but it lacks a bit of polish and subtlety, with bass overbearing during *Losing Touch* and a shortfall in terms of clarity to both Brandon Flowers' vocals and Alice Roberts's commentary in *Ice Age Giants*.

Quality improves greatly if you switch to a hi-fi source such as a CD transport or Blu-ray deck and connect using the stereo phono. Higher frequencies are no longer flattened out, with the string sections in the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* effortlessly allowed to blend with the percussion. So in this regard you may find them a better option, depending on your own setup.

As for the Roth's Bluetooth capability, this proves frustrating. Not only does it compromise audio quality through compression, it's just not as robust as some wireless systems, and I frequently experienced glitches, clicks and drop-outs. You just have to try it and see, but I'd be reluctant to use it.

HCC VERDICT

Roth OLi POWA-5 → £250

Overall ★★★★★

Roth's OLi POWA-5s house 5in midbass drivers

Monitor Audio WS100

Cool-running cubes with a wireless trick up their sleeve

USING MINI C-CAM drivers distilled from some of Monitor Audio's hi-fi speakers, the WS100 has instant appeal to AV enthusiasts – there's some decent technology at play here. Each 5in cube has 30W of power driving a 3in bass driver and a 0.75in gold dome tweeter. The left speaker is tethered by a 1m cable to

the right, which connects to your PC by 3.5mm line-in or, preferably, digitally without wires. This option uses SKAA rather than Bluetooth or AirPlay. A USB dongle is provided, which can feed up to four pairs of speakers for multiroom action (albeit meaning all speakers have to operate at the same volume).

Build quality is robust and each speaker pivots if required to optimise sound direction. Pairing is a mildly complicated but one-off procedure, that installs the dongle as an audio output option in your PC's preferences. A diddy remote is supplied.

The WS100 runs efficiently cool and is the only model here to gently fade the sound in. It also generates impressive volume for its size without distorting. However, music reveals that the bass performance doesn't match the mid-range and higher frequencies, with The Killers lacking in low-end, leaving the vocals and guitars isolated. The electronic wizardry of OMD is likewise a bit tinny. This bass-drought extends to movie and TV material; the commentary in *Ice Age Giants* feels harsh and the Monaco pile-up in *Iron Man 2* clangs rather than envelopes. It's not an awful performance – there's no muffling or lack of clarity – but I had hoped for better.



The speakers can pivot to optimise sound direction

HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio WS100 → £250

Overall ★★★★★

Final standings

THERE'S NO DOUBT that each of these four models delivers a sonic improvement over a PC's in-built speakers and their budget counterparts, yet performance varies across the quartet – and it doesn't always correlate to the price tags involved...

The **Monitor Audio WS100** is as good an implementation of a wireless speaker as you'll find in terms of transmission quality and reliability – SKAA impresses here in comparison to the Bluetooth of the Roth contender. But going wireless is not top priority on a desktop – performance is – and it's the somewhat underpowered bass response that ultimately pushes the WS100 into fourth place.

In third place comes the **Roth OLI POWA-5**, which despite a multitude of connectivity options, classic bookshelf looks (available in black, white or red) and impressive dimensions, doesn't have the expected power or control we'd like. Switching to a genuine hi-fi source does yield greater finesse than Bluetooth or the line-in from a computer.

There's very little to choose between the **Bose Companion 20** and the **Bowers & Wilkins MM-1**. Both are well designed and attractive with excellent performance. In terms of sound quality the MM-1 edges it, however, the Companion 20 isn't too far behind, yet retails for half the price. For this reason (especially in these austerity times), and the delightful simplicity of its hard-wired control pad, the Bose Companion 20 just manages to snatch top spot from the B&W MM-1. If money doesn't matter, though, plump for the B&W duo.



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DIGITAL COPY

Mark Craven is pleased to discover that the Blu-ray format in the UK is in rude health – and that people still rent physical discs

IT WAS MARK Twain, or possibly Benjamin Disraeli, who famously outlined three types of lies as 'Lies, damned lies, and statistics', meaning, essentially, that statistics are barely worth the piece of paper they're printed on. In my view, however, Twain (or Disraeli) was himself lying. Statistics can be very useful – especially when it comes to talking about Blu-ray.

Physical media, you may have read, is dying faster than you can say 'Netflix'. We don't want to own anything any more, apparently, and would rather store all our content in the Cloud. When you consider the proliferation of media streaming hardware it seems a compelling argument, until you look at the actual facts.

The British Video Association (BVA) is my go-to body for Blu-ray sales data. As an organisation that exists 'to champion video entertainment in all its forms, from packaged media through to digital services,' I trust it to be impartial and a good source of info. And its most recent release of figures (from May 7) show the BD format in the UK positively thriving. First-quarter Blu-ray disc sales in 2013 were up by 44 per cent on the same period in 2012, and **sales of standalone Blu-ray players since the format's launch have now broken the 5million barrier**. HD discs are now a mass market proposition, rather than a niche concept.

The BVA's director general, Lavinia Carey, described the figures as 'most encouraging' and I'm not about to argue, especially when considered against the backdrop of High Street turmoil for the likes of HMV and Blockbuster.

Carey also said the BVA's report illustrated people's 'attachment' to video discs – and this for me is a key point. I'm no anthropologist, but it seems

to me that we humans, generally, like having stuff. And this might explain the lukewarm (or stone cold) reaction to UltraViolet.

Weird idea

UltraViolet, you may have forgotten, is the pan-industry drive to enable disc buyers to have a digital version of their purchase accessible on a number of devices. It's a weird idea, based around telling people who have already bought physical media that they don't really want it, and, instead, here's a lower-quality version that's yours to watch once you've jumped through all manner of technological hoops. At the Digital Hollywood conference at the end of April, the powers that be (including bigwigs from Lionsgate, DTS and Sony Pictures) admitted as much, claiming 'we've got to educate consumers on the benefits' and start selling UltraViolet 'as a bridge for consumers to go from physical to digital.' Some of us don't actually want to go from physical to digital at all, and are happy buying discs, thank you very much. It's why we bought an HDTV.

Not that downloading and streaming doesn't have its benefits. Convenience, content choice – I get it. But even though I can probably watch *Bad Boys II* from any number of VOD services right this very minute, that won't stop me buying it on Blu-ray the day it is finally released.

And the last word from the BVA. Digital sales currently amount to 22 per cent of the total UK video market – a good healthy figure, no doubt. Yet disc rentals, something I'm sure many of us have long considered as relevant as analogue TV, still count for 11 per cent. Statistics, eh? You couldn't make 'em up ■

Do you still rent Blu-rays and DVDs?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

As part of a rent-two-get-two-free offer, **Mark Craven** once rented a compilation video tape called *Crash Crazy*. And rather enjoyed it





FILM FANATIC

The next-generation PlayStation 4 and Xbox One consoles are finally on the way. So why is it that avid gamer **Anton van Beek** is struggling to muster any excitement?

EVER SINCE MY parents first decided to buy a home computer in the early 1980s, I've been a keen gamer. Naturally, from a parental viewpoint, the purchase was done entirely for its perceived educational benefits – hence the choice of the BBC Model A (swiftly upgraded to a Model B). However, it wasn't long before any thoughts I may have harboured about learning to programme in BASIC (beyond the obligatory '10 PRINT "Anton is ace"; 20 GOTO 10) were replaced by the need to fill all of my designated computer time swinging across battlements in *Hunchback*, digging for diamonds in *Repton* or becoming the galaxy's most wanted criminal in *Elite*.

As the years progressed, so did the wide array of computers and consoles that I owned. A Sinclair ZX Spectrum +, ZX Spectrum +2, SEGA Master System, Commodore Amiga 500, Amiga 1200, Super Nintendo, Atari Jaguar, Nintendo 64, Sony PlayStation 2, Microsoft Xbox, SEGA Dreamcast, Nintendo Wii and various gaming PCs are among the many devices I've connected with over the past few decades.

This, I hope, gives you some insight into how large a part videogames have played in my life – and continue to do so. And this may help you understand the confusion I'm now mired in, as I attempt to come to terms with the feeling of complete indifference to the launch announcements for both Sony's PlayStation 4 and Microsoft's Xbox One gizmos.

Game over?

For me not to be utterly thrilled and salivating like Cujo at the prospect of a new console is an extremely new experience. Heck, I was even intrigued by the potential of Nintendo's quirky

Wii U – albeit not so much as to actually want to own one. So what's different about the PS4 and the Xbox One?

For me, it's that the ability to actually play games feels like such a secondary concern right now. I understand that both Sony and Microsoft will want to focus their launch announcements on the new features that their respective consoles bring to the table. But when both companies spend so much time focusing on the ability to instantly share clips online via the click of a single button, or how easy it is to integrate everything with social network sites, or their box's talent of functioning as a PVR controlled by waving your hands in the air, I find myself unable to dig up any real enthusiasm.

You see, I already own numerous different devices that can do all of those things (minus the arm-waving bit, obviously). **What none of those devices allow me to do, though, is explore the world of *Skyrim***, or take Liverpool to the top of the league, on a 50in TV.

This is why I currently own an Xbox 360 and a PS3. When it comes to bigscreen gaming there really is nothing better available. Sure, they can do other things as well, but – outside of the fact that the PS3 was once the only machine you could absolutely guarantee any given Blu-ray disc would spin on – none of that actually played any part in me choosing to buy them.

All I really want from a games console is top-quality gaming, and so far that seems to be a long way down the list of things that either Sony or Microsoft want to talk about when it comes to their next-gen machines. When they actually start talking about the games, I may start paying attention ■

Are you excited by the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek has spent so much of his life playing videogames that he now demands to be paid in giant floating gold coins and pixelated bunches of fruit

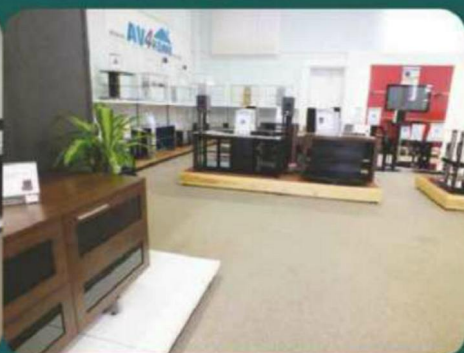




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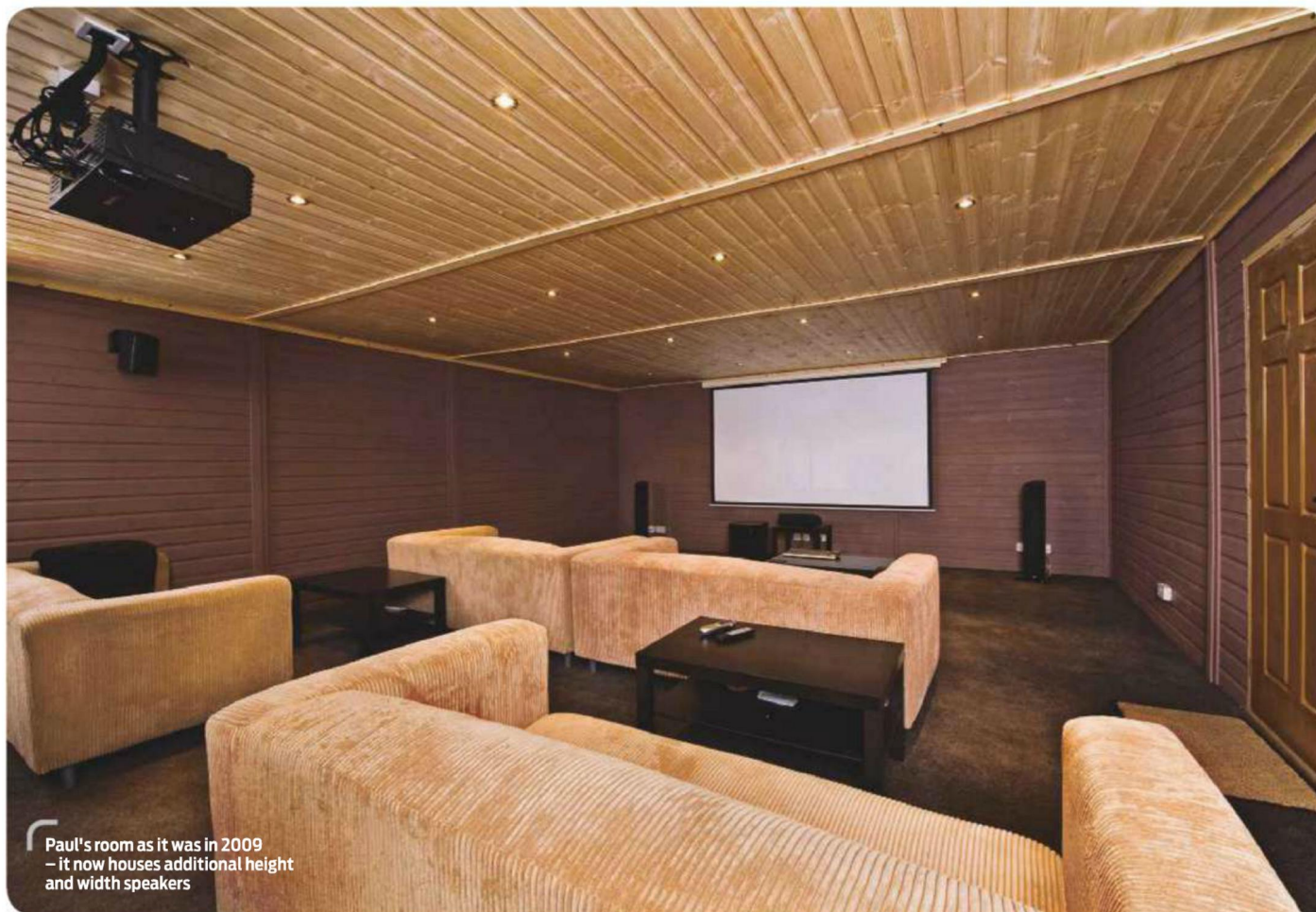
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Update Certified: AV-Holic!



AV-Holic **Paul Slim**, owner of a glorious home-cinema-in-a-shed, returns to *HCC* to explain the benefits brought about from adding 3D and additional speakers

THIS HOME CINEMA may be familiar to some of you, as it was first featured in the magazine back in 2009. A projector-based setup in a custom-built shed in a garden, it looks nondescript from the outside, but houses cutting-edge kit and plenty of seating and space for an ever-expanding Blu-ray connection. And when its owner, *HCC* reader Paul Slim, got back in touch to tell us he'd upgraded much of the system to include full 11.2-channel audio and 3D, we decided it was time to become reacquainted with the room known as 'Reelwood'...

So, what's been the best thing about having your own garden-shed cinema room?

I'm quite a quiet person – I don't go round telling everyone about it – but the word spread

and it has got me jobs with Best Buy (they interviewed me in the shed) and Carphone Warehouse/Geek Squad, to the point where the CEO knows me as 'Paul with the shed'!

It is a great place to relax and watch movies. In particular, the sound of movies is my passion, so to be able to watch and listen to movies and music, as the artist or director intended them to be heard and seen, is always a good thing. And, as it's in the garden and I have understanding neighbours, I can also have it at levels that most people probably wouldn't be able to in their homes.

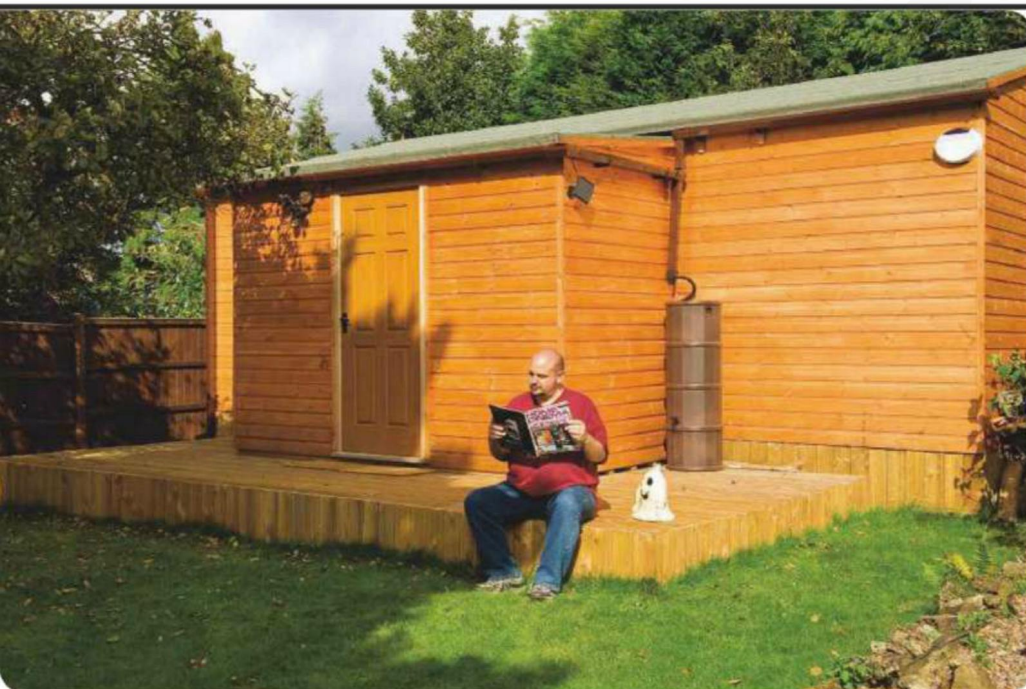
How often do you use it?

Not as much as I would like – I would say once or twice a week at most. Sunday nights is the only definite weekly event. My friends and I

have been ordering food and watching a movie on Sunday nights since the mid '90s – that's stayed a tradition.

You've added 11.2 surround: what kit are you using, and what's your verdict on height/width channels? Is it something other *HCC* readers should consider?

I'm using an Onkyo TX-NR5010 as the main receiver and a Denon AVR-2805 to power the width speakers. They definitely complete the soundstage – it sounds amazing with the height/width switched off but when you switch them on the whole front soundstage opens up. Although they are not discrete, if you unplug the main left, centre and right there is no bleed, the only sounds you can hear are the ones that should be there. I've listened



No home cinema is complete without a replica of Ted – especially if he's wearing 3D glasses...

Paul relaxes outside his bespoke hi-tech shed with a copy of his favourite magazine



Each year, Paul decks the room out for Halloween horror-thons



The rear of the room is devoted to our AV-Holic's massive disc collection

to near-whole movies with just the 'FX' speakers plugged in to hear what it decides to locate to each speaker and its very clever and really interesting.

I'm still trying to decide which I prefer out of the two types of 11.2 modes – DTS Neo:X or Audyssey's DSX – as, unbelievably, compared to the 7.1 decoders they both create different audible mixes. I would say DTS spreads the sound around a bit more and possibly emphasises the music and more subtle effects whereas DSX is more direct and places off-screen FX and dialogue in the wides that DTS would keep in the L/C/R.

Two examples are *Rush Hour* and *L.A. Confidential*. In *Rush Hour*, a helicopter is hovering off-screen behind you; with DTS Neo:X it can be heard behind you in the back left, rear left and almost echoing off the building in the left height speaker. With DSX, it's purely in the back left with a little bit of ambience across the lefts.

In *L.A. Confidential*, and the shootout towards the end where Russell Crowe reloads

as the bad guys circle the house, with DTS Neo:X there's a 360-degree circling of the footsteps around the room and a whistle comes from the left speaker. With DSX it's also a perfect circling, but the whistle comes from the left-width speaker...

I would advise people to give it a go if their receiver has the option of extra channels and if the room (or their partner!) allows for it – just don't expect everything you watch to have sounds coming from above! The extra speakers are mainly used for subtle effects and music to expand the ambience, but I feel it's definitely worth the upgrade and I wouldn't ever go back. We even have height channels in the bedroom now!

What films have blown you away in 11.2? And why?

This is a tough one as since I have had the receiver I've watched everything in 11.2! Everything just sounds better.

I'm always listening out for killer demo material (who cares if the movie was any good

as long as there was good demo scene, right?). I have tried the two Lionsgate discs that have the optimised-for-11.1 audio (*The Expendables 2* and *Dredd 3D*) but didn't find any specific scenes where the heights or widths were used for exact spot effects (other than the channel checkers, which are great!) compared to any other 'non-optimised' movie.

An excellent scene that does use all of the speakers to great effect is the opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Right from the opening shot the sounds of the jungle fill the air, then when the birds fly from the statue's mouth the scared guide runs off into the left-wide speaker. Later (03:15), Indy cracks his whip across the

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic, and we'll be in touch.

soundfield, panning from the left to right heights down to the bottom left-wide, ending with a gunshot from the right width which then echoes all around the room. And when the rolling boulder happens, it makes use of the extra height and width speakers to convey the sheer size and weight of it – having two subwoofers also helps this, too!

Lastly, when he escapes and boards the plane, it climbs up from the water with a wonderful, low bass note. And as Indy is showing his displeasure at there being a snake in the cockpit, the plane's engine can be heard in the right height speaker – as they fly off into the sunset the plane enters the shot through the right height speaker and swoops seamlessly down to the centre channel.

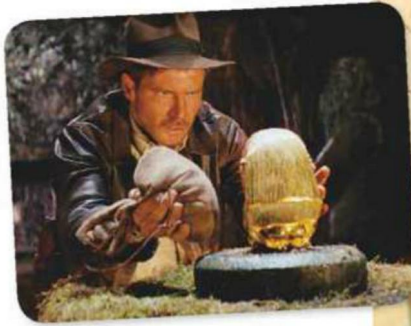
You've also upgraded to 3D – what's your favourite 3D Blu-ray? What do you use to show off your system?

I really enjoyed the conversion of *Jurassic Park*. That along with *Titanic* are two definite discs to show people that a movie doesn't have to be shot in 3D to be a really good 3D movie. *Avatar* is still one of the best, especially for its 'wow-factor' visuals and sound. Or, if people want to see things poking them in the eye in pretty much any scene, try *Madagascar 3*!

Are you planning any more upgrades in the near future?

I would like to get matching subwoofers and matching rear speakers. I currently use two Mission subwoofers – I couldn't get a second one to match so just got as near as I could! I'd like to get four matching Q Acoustics woofers and, as my fronts are all Q Acoustics, I'd like to have more 2020i so all the surrounds match, too.

I have found the Q Acoustics range to be flawless. I got the main floorstanders (2050s) to replace my original Mission speakers. In my opinion the Qs are better than some speakers



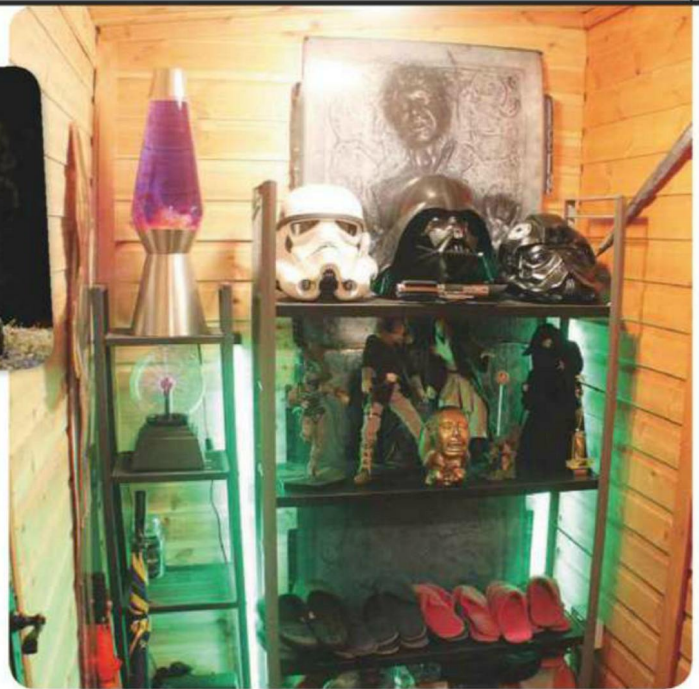
Top: Raiders of the Lost Ark benefits from 11.2 sound processing. Right: Visitors can grab a pair of slippers in the memorabilia-stuffed foyer

that I encountered costing £15,000 each! I would class my setup as 'on a budget' but – and I'm not one to brag or be full of myself – the shed still sounds better than any demo room I've been in, and I would hate to think how much some of those rooms cost! It probably all comes down to having someone passionate enough to set them up right and spend the time tweaking – I have probably spent more time calibrating than actually watching movies!

Are you excited by 4K?

Oh yes! Anything that lets me watch something in the best quality available will always be of interest to me. I have seen a few demos of 4K, all of which were outstanding – even if the sets weren't calibrated and had all their motion processing, etc, switched on! I can't wait to get hands-on with it and get calibrating. Once there is a set delivery method and a constant stream of content I'm sure it will get more momentum.

The idea of upscaling to 4K doesn't bother me as much, though I'm sure if I had a set it would constantly be switched on. It might take a few years in the UK as I would say Blu-ray and 3D, and possibly even HD, are still not commonplace in the majority of homes.



It's not something I will be rushing out to buy unless my Samsung D8000 breaks any time soon, as the picture on that looks as good as some of the 4K material I have seen.

How is your setup controlled?

Do you use a mountain of handsets?

I have had two Harmony remotes in the past. They were great but I did have a few problems with them skipping commands and with the RF, as all the equipment is behind me. I now use the Onkyo TX-NR5010 remote and an IR repeater. It controls everything, including the lights. The only thing I can't get it to do is the recording button for Sky!

Lastly, what do your friends think of the room?

My friends love it! We have Halloween and Christmas parties in the shed – I decorate it accordingly and we have horror movie marathons and Christmas movie days. We also put on movies for our friends' children, my mum has movie nights with her friends and my girlfriend has girls' nights – the last one being a screening of *Magic Mike*. I also use it for staff meetings and work outings, and recently had some celebs endorsing it on twitter, including Oliver Stone! ■



An Onkyo TX-NR5010 is Paul's latest AV purchase

CINEMA ROOM CHECKLIST

ONKYO: TX-NR5010 AV receiver
DENON: AVR-2805 AV receiver
EPSON: EH-TW6000 3D projector
PANASONIC: DMP-BDT310 Blu-ray player
SONY: PS3 – US model for Region A discs
MICROSOFT: Xbox 360
WESTERN DIGITAL: WDTV Live
TOSHIBA: HD-EP35 HD DVD player
SKY: Sky+ HD
Q ACOUSTICS: 2 x 2050; 4 x 2020i; 1 x 2000
MISSION: 1 x E5AS subwoofer; 1 x M6AS subwoofer; 4 x E50 surround speakers



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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Taking control of my TV

Over the last two years we've bought three televisions: a 46in Sony Smart TV to replace a 32in CRT, a 40in Samsung Smart TV to replace a first-generation LCD, and a 19in Toshiba to replace an analogue 17in CRT. We're very pleased with all three in terms of performance, having read reviews beforehand. However, I have gripes with each of them, and they're not something I recall ever seeing mentioned in a review so I was wondering if I'm alone in this respect.

Firstly, when the TV is off and I decide I want to watch a channel, I want to press the channel button (say, '1' for BBC1) and I want the TV to switch on and be on that channel. All of the old TVs did this but only the Samsung does

of the new ones – the others switch on but you need a second press of the remote to get the channel you want. What purpose could this need for a second key-press possibly serve – checking I'm sure?

Secondly, when I switch on an external source, like a Blu-ray player, I want the TV to switch to the relevant input. The Sony and Samsung do this but the Toshiba doesn't. All of the old TVs used to. Sure, there might be times where you switch on an external source and don't want to watch it – to eject a disc for example. But this is far less often than times you do.

Lastly, when I'm finished watching the external source and I press a number on the remote, I want the TV to switch to DTV and select that channel. The Sony

Controlling your flatscreen TV: is it getting more complicated?

and the Toshiba do this, but the Samsung insists you use the source selector to return to DTV first and only then do the channel buttons work.

With the competition being as high as it is for sales, I'm amazed that manufacturers seem to have neglected ease of operation to the extent that more key presses are required to do the same simple operation on my 2013 TV than on my 1993 CRT. Of course, I realise that access to all the new features requires more buttons and menus, but I'm talking about simple functions (turning on, selecting channels and external sources) that have been the same for 25 years. At the very least any



★ STAR LETTER...

In praise of multichannel music!

At last someone else who has discovered music can be played back via their AV multichannel setup (*Digital Copy*, #222)! I've been doing that for decades. My system is a modest Marantz SR7007 AV receiver; Marantz K1 Pearl Lite CD/Super Audio CD player and Oppo BDP-83 NuForce Edition, all linked by Chord cables. It has taken me years to finally reach this standard of exquisite replay of my multichannel music collection on CD, SACD, DVD-Audio, DVD and Blu-ray.

Being an old codger my taste in music varies considerably, and includes Clapton, Cohen, Bibb and, yes, James Last, as well as those mentioned in your article. The record labels you referred to, as well as Eagle Vision and AIX, make up some of my library. For true high-definition video and audio (Dolby TrueHD 5.1) with a choice of perspectives, including Stage Mix, Audience Mix without Dynamic Processing/Equalisation or Artificial Reverberation, I recommend AIX Blu-ray.

To give you an insight, listen and watch *BNO – Here & There Vol II* (AIX85058).

I'm surprised that HCC no longer reviews music content/concerts released on Blu-ray or DVD – there must be enough content out there to warrant an article, annually at least.

To all at HCC: enjoy the music as much as you like your blockbuster movies!

Roman Urbanowicz, via email

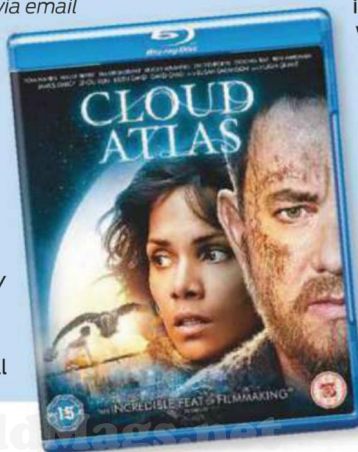
Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the AIX BD recommendation, Roman – 'coastal country' music could be right up my alley.

Regarding music/concert reviews, we do feature these occasionally, but will

take your suggestion of greater coverage on board. In fact, we typically get good responses whenever we discuss the dedicated audio side of our hobby, and it's obvious that SACD, DVD-Audio and hi-res downloads still play a part for many readers, so we're currently beaver away on a comprehensive look at what content is available, and from where.

We can't guarantee we'll be mentioning James Last, though...

Star letter-writer Roman wins a copy of *Cloud Atlas* on Blu-ray courtesy of our pals at Warner Home Video. Co-directed by the Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer, this epic screen adaptation of David Mitchell's award-winning novel is available to own on DVD and Blu-ray from July 1, and is available to download now.



Want to write for HCC?

Then we want to hear from you! Tell us about your all-conquering home cinema setup or favourite piece of AV gear in no more than 1,000 words and we'll publish the best ones in forthcoming issues. And if you're lucky, you could find yourself joining our enthusiastic team of reviewers who share your passion for bigscreen, surround sound movie viewing.

Email your review, along with a couple of images, to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading **Reader's Review**, or post it to Home Cinema Choice magazine, AVTech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, Kent BR6 6BG. And don't forget to provide us with your address and telephone contact number!

What you choose to write about is up to you – from your high-end TV to your indispensable media player, we'd love you know your views.

unnecessary key presses should warrant a mention in your reviews – it's amazing how they add up over the life of the TV.
George Muir, via email

Mark Craven replies: Generally, we find that TV remotes are very similar – at least in the way they're laid out and the key functions they feature. However, as you've found, different brands do things in different ways and it's true that controlling a TV isn't quite as straightforward as it used to be – although I'm sure manufacturers would argue that this is due to the changing nature of TVs themselves. My personal bugbear is the lack of the dedicated input selection buttons (HDMI 1, HDMI 2, etc) that you'll find on AVR handsets!

I know about Knowhow

Having been an avid reader of HCC for many years now, I can honestly say I have enjoyed every edition to date and always look forward to the next edition with anticipation. Issue #221 was no

exception. Being an avid movie fan I especially enjoyed the 'Movies on Demand' feature but was surprised you decided to omit the Curry's/PC World service, Knowhow Movies. I have used their service on many occasions and cannot fault it. There is no subscription, I just pop into one of their stores and buy a Top-Up card from as little as £5 and redeem it on the website. You can stream in SD or HD, from £3.99 and £4.99 respectively, and new releases are available to watch the same day as they are released to rent or buy. Also, while watching *Argo* recently, I was streaming at only 0.8mbps over Wi-Fi and had no buffering at all. I think it's a great service, so I would like to know what you think.
Addie Booth, via email

Mark Craven replies: Our roundup of movie streaming services featured Netflix, LoveFilm, Blinkbox, Acetrax and Now TV – a mixture of the most popular and the most innovative. Knowhow Movies didn't feature, as we felt Blinkbox was better supported by hardware manufacturers. We'll be taking a look at the platform in a forthcoming issue.

Still got HD DVDs to buy

Hi, thanks for publishing my letter in the last issue. Just to let you know, I still haven't bought every HD DVD disc, and in the last month, I've bought *Troy: Director's*

Cut and *P2*. The latter couldn't be found anywhere, on Blu-ray or DVD, so HD DVD came to the rescue! I've also upgraded my US HD A1 to the HD XA1. This would have cost £700 back in the day, but last month was only £50. Sorted!

Eddie Fowler, via email

Anton van Beek replies: Keep going Eddie – the second-hand disc market needs people like you! However, if the *P2* you're talking about is the 2007 horror written by Alexandre Aja, it has actually had DVD and BD releases (in the UK at least) from Palisades Tartan.

DVD is great – as is CRT

In #221 you said, 'if any readers are still employing a dedicated DVD deck in their setup, please get in touch and tell us why.'

I use a Panasonic SC-XH170 DVD player/home cinema system. It offers excellent performance, and I struggle to imagine that a

better AV performance could be secured without spending disproportionate and unreasonable sums of money.

To my mind, there is too much emphasis on the relative merits of AV formats, with an implicit message that older formats are no longer legitimate means to the end of enjoying the cinematic works of one's choosing.

I would not contest that the best 1080p televisions are the optimum means of display. However, I would, quite seriously, suggest that many late 1990s CRT-based TVs remain superior to much of what is available from manufacturers today.

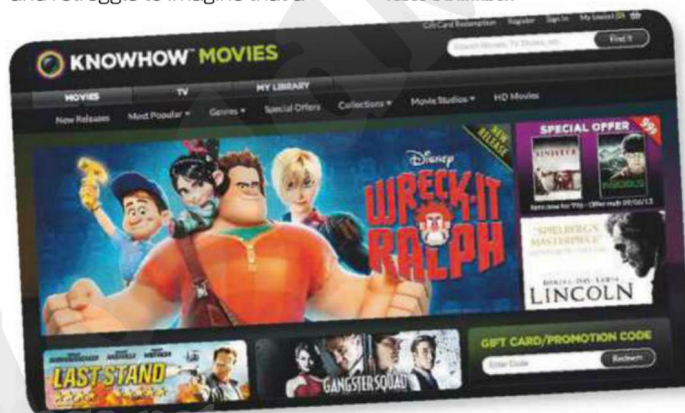
I have, in the last year, used a 720p plasma television. Its performance was good, but a second-hand 33in 4:3 CRT (from the same, Japanese, manufacturer) has proven, in my experience, a superior means of

Knowhow Movies: a rival to Tesco's Blinkbox

CONTACT US...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, BR6 6BG, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.



viewing both broadcast television and DVDs.

So the real issue should not be DVD versus Blu-ray, or LCD versus plasma. Rather, we should focus on which manufacturers offer consistently excellent AV performance. Otherwise, inferior products will be seen as preferable merely because they share a particular format. *SD Dobson, via email*

Mark Craven replies: But, SD, format wars are the lifeblood of our hobby!

More seriously, we appreciate your point about AV performance over a particular format, and if you're happy with your Panasonic DVD system then who are we to argue. Also, we understand that new technology is often beyond the budgets of many home cinema fans. But... CRT TV, really? We can barely remember what one of those looks like. Again, we'd love to hear from other readers still using such a display!

Too many remotes!

I am the proud owner of a dedicated home cinema room with 7.1 Miller & Kreisel speakers, Pioneer SC-LX76 receiver, Pioneer Blu-ray player, Sky+HD, Panasonic 50in plasma, Futronix lighting, Controliss blackout blinds and a couple of Stressless recliners. Not to mention my latest addition – a JVC DLA-X55 projector and electric drop-down screen, purchased as a result of an excellent day at the Bristol Sound & Vision Show this February!

Obviously you are thinking I want to an AV-Holic in the mag? Well, not just yet! What I need is advice: I now have seven remote controls, and would appreciate your opinion on the best way forward. I have an iPad Mini, and had thought that I might be able to utilise that in some capacity, rather than purchasing an all-in-one learning remote, but at first glance it looks like I might be barking up the wrong tree! What would you suggest in my position? *Richard Blythe, via email*



DemoPad allows you to customise the control interface on your iDevice

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the letter Richard. Have you looked at DemoPad (www.demopad.com)? This is a customisable control interface (downloadable for £28 from iTunes) that will work with your iPad Mini, although will need to get additional third-

party IP-IR hardware. We haven't tested it yet – we will do soon – but know that other HCC readers have found it be a fun and reliable alternative to a full-blown pro-grade automated setup. And don't be shy – we'd love to see some pictures of your setup...

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



Parker

Fancy watching HCC-favourite Jason Statham doing what he does best in a hard-boiled crime movie? To celebrate the DVD and Blu-ray release of Statham's latest hit

Parker on July 8th, EntertainmentOne has given us five copies of the film on Blu-ray to give away to some lucky HCC readers.

Question:

Jason Statham used to compete at an international level in which aquatic sport?

Answer:

- A)** Water polo **B)** White-water rafting
C) Diving

Email your answer with '**Parker**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



The Brood

David Cronenberg's chilling 1979 horror film *The Brood* finally oozes its way onto Blu-ray in the UK on July 8th, alongside a new DVD edition of the film.

And thanks to our friends at Second Sight Films we have five copies of *The Brood* on Blu-ray up for grabs.

Question:

David Cronenberg directed which of these comic book adaptations?

Answer:

- A)** Spider-Man **B)** Road to Perdition
C) A History of Violence

Email your answer with '**Brood**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Stoker

Acclaimed Korean director Park Chan-wook made the jump to Hollywood with the sinister thriller *Stoker*. The film debuted on Digital HD™ on June 24th and is available on Blu-ray

and DVD from July 1st courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment – and we have five copies of the Blu-ray to give away.

Question:

Which of the following films was not part of Park Chan-wook's 'Vengeance Trilogy'?

Answer:

- A)** OldBoy **B)** Lady Vengeance
C) Revenge of the Nerds

Email your answer with '**Stoker**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

Terms & Conditions

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REWIND

It was a format that passed many people by, despite offering some interesting tech – **Team HCC** returns to the launch of D-VHS

VHS WAS BORN back in the mid-1970s, so even by 1999, and the first outing of D-VHS, some were beginning to regard this tape-based format with a degree of suspicion. The trials of programming a VCR had long become the staple of standup comics, and more importantly the arrival of DVD had provided a clear signpost of where most people's home entertainment world was heading, with recording to a disc the obvious next step. In hindsight, D-VHS was doomed from the beginning.

To say this format never took off is like saying George Lucas is partial to special effects – an understatement of massive proportions. Within five years of its premiere it was effectively dead. However, in 1999, **HCC** was excited enough about it to trek to Austria for a demo with D-VHS supporter Philips.

Artificial intelligence

'A new mutant VHS format with greatly enhanced brainpower,' was our verdict, with **HCC** scribbler Kulwinder Singh Rai adding that 'technologically, it's to VHS as Viagra is to Ginseng.' Suffice to say, we were enthused by the prospects of the new platform – it's just a shame those prospects were never fully realised...

D-VHS (known originally as Data VHS) was intended to be a mass-market digital video recording format, with tapes capable of storing up to 50GB of data, and able to archive MPEG-2 broadcast bitstreams from the new-fangled DTV services, upto resolutions of 1080i. And the fact that said resolutions were absent from the UK (and would remain so until 2006) wasn't seen as a deal-breaker – 'we can still use the upcoming D-VHS bit-rate standards to record 49 hours of *Days of Lives*...' quipped Rai).

At the dawn of the new millennium, JVC's £1,000 HM-DR10000 broke cover. Finished in tasteful gold, this monster machine introduced AV early-adopters to the wonders of SD digital video. No more fuzz, no more instability – just beautifully-clear MPEG-2

encoded visuals, with flawless digital audio and the best colour we'd ever seen from a home format. And those long recording times were a boon to space-starved TV addicts.

The DF cassettes were expensive, but it was soon discovered that regular 'high-band' S-VHS media worked almost as well. Talking of which, the HM-DR10000 – and its Philips clone, the VR20D – were also backwards-compatible with existing VHS and S-VHS tapes, which they did a great job of playing.

As with most decent VCRs of the time, the JVC heavyweight incorporated an analogue TV tuner with Nicam sound. It could also record from one of those snazzy-new digital set-top boxes via S-Video or composite. The Firewire input, meanwhile, facilitated dubbing from digital camcorders. The only other D-VHS machine sold in the UK was Thomson's lacklustre DVH-8090.

Of course, not long after D-VHS was introduced, the first PVRs were offered to tech-savvy UK consumers. Late 2000 brought us the original TiVo, and Sky+ came a year



WHAT WE SAID THEN...

A THE TALE OF THE TAPE

D-VHS offered stupendous recording times. A single DF-420 cassette yielded up to 7 hours of pristine 14Mbps video in 'STD' mode and the lower-bitrate 'LS3' setting gave 14 hours

B NEED A NEW CRYSTAL BALL?

'I could imagine that a consumer version of recordable DVD could be in widespread use by, say, 2010', said Philips VCR's head of strategy and development. A brave assertion woefully wide of the mark...

C KOREAN INVASION

In 1999, Samsung wasn't the global AV giant it is now, but with products like its high-performance DVD-807, it was already upsetting the Japanese-led status quo

WE TESTED WITH...

ALIEN: DIRECTOR'S CUT

Twentieth Century Fox unleashed Ridley Scott's seminal sci-fi

shocker in HD on D-Theater and we loved it. Not quite as much as we love the more recent *Alien Anthology* Blu-ray boxset (pictured), though



Answer: To use D-VHS to record digital TV, you'll need a set-top box with Firewire (IEEE 1394) connections – sadly no sign of these yet though.

Left: Philips' Adui Prodigal believes recordable DVD will sit comfortably alongside D-VHS, when it arrives.

B

WANT TO GO

It's impossible to predict how enthusiastic consumers will be to D-VHS when it arrives, either because that Philips spec HCC is but if the demonstration that Philips gave in London, don't I think you'll find it's a digital format, don't I think you'll find it's a digital format, don't I think you'll find it's a digital format.

While technically there seems little doubt that D-VHS can deliver broadcast that will be the standard, its success will depend to a large extent on gaining the approval of the nation's digital TV manufacturers, which will need to sanction their set-top boxes and conditional access systems being fitted with Firewire outputs to allow the downloading of digital broadcast data. As their comments reveal, few manufacturers are keen to do this.

Prising, too, will be a factor. But on that point things look a little more optimistic. Since D-VHS decks will effectively use the same mechanisms as their analogue counterparts – albeit with extra heads and processing – consumers will be kept to a very small level, don't be surprised if first-generation D-VHS decks will be slightly more than current premium-format VHS decks.

Which, these are clearly, will be a significant hurdle set to be overcome. The next step, however, is to get the format approved by the EBU, which will be a significant hurdle set to be overcome.

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FAST-FORWARD

VHS still soldiers on!



While D-VHS in 2013 is a distant memory, VHS lives on like some sort of indestructible electronic cockroach, with at least one AV manufacturer – Toshiba – packing the '70s tech into two of its three current HDD-based recorders. The RDXV60 is a triple-format affair, marrying VHS, DVD and HDD and allowing you to archive your old tapes to either digital alternative. The step-down DVR20 (above) does away with the HDD. Both decks pack a Freeview tuner, 1080p upscaling and a USB port for JPEG/MP3 playback. Chuck in an Ethernet socket and you'd almost have a 'Smart VCR'...

after. These tapeless EPG-driven machines were much easier to use, and viewers could access a specific programme with speed.

A final push

D-VHS had one more trick, though – hi-def. The 2002 upgrade, known as 'D-Theater', predated the Blu-ray and HD DVD disc formats by over three years. It was, alas, only officially available in the US, which had enjoyed HD broadcasting since 1998 – as a result, there was a base of HDTV sets on which to view D-Theater content. Among the latter were pre-recorded movies; US consumers could, however, also timeshift HD content via the Firewire port built into their set-top boxes.

D-Theater supported both 720p and 1080i modes via its analogue component output – there was no HDMI, of course. An optical digital port routed audio to your AVR; pre-recorded movies usually boasted a Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack – later, the standard was modified to include DTS support.

While not officially launched in the UK, serious home cinema enthusiasts with HD-capable screens and projectors obtained the players as 'grey' imports. As in fact, did HCC – and the tapes soon became a great way of putting new displays through their paces. Much of the available content was from 20th Century Fox, with *Alien: Director's Cut* becoming a firm favourite. Picture quality was a revelation, with never-before-seen levels of clarity and detail. Other D-Theater releases included *Master & Commander*, *Independence Day* and *I, Robot*, which proved to be the last.

In hindsight, D-VHS was a format that UK broadcasters weren't ready for – and, of course, Sky already had its own plans. But for those who did take the plunge, it provided an intriguing alternative to its analogue forebears and a glimpse of the HD future ■

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CINEMAS GO DIGITAL
DEATH-KNELL FOR

PLUS
PLAYSTATION 2
++ BEAM TV
AROUND YOUR
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SECTION ++
DOLBY DIGITAL
FOR DIGI-TV ++
DVD REGIONAL
CODING MADE
ILLEGAL?

The sound of

IMAX



The IMAX 'experience' is one thing that you will certainly struggle to recreate in your own home.

Adam Rayner quizzes the brand's Chief Technology Officer about its 'Secret Sauce'

Brian Bonnick, IMAX's Chief Technology Officer, says the company's audio-visual mission is to try and 'recreate reality'



IT ALL STARTED with a disastrous screening at my local multiplex cinema, where I eventually had to complain about stifling heat, 3D trailers in a no-glasses 2D showing and a baffling system of seat allocation. And when the complaint yielded a grunted response, I began looking for another cinema for my business – and discovered that my local ODEON in Uxbridge had a new IMAX screen...

I came out from my visit very impressed – overwhelmed by the superb whole-field-of-view screen, tickled by the staffer who made a pre-movie announcement and, above all, blown away by the astonishing sound. Girthy audio

at 118dB and deep, deep sub-bass means body-shaking, visceral wonder. And it's 'only' 6.1. I endeavoured to discover more about it – and, thankfully, IMAX's Chief Technology Officer, Brian Bonnick, was happy to help.

HCC: Do all IMAX systems have the same audio electronics and speaker setup?

Brian Bonnick: 'The answer's sort of yes and no. Our theatres go as old as forty years now, so in our earlier systems, we have an earlier generation, so that part is "no". But the "yes" part is that they are all fundamentally based on similar concepts, with updates in the technology. All of our digital



The recent *Star Trek Into Darkness* was released in IMAX 3D format

systems definitely all have identical systems. The greater majority of our film-based systems have all been upgraded over the last few years. So, they are not at the latest revision of technology, being the second generation back. From an acoustical standpoint, it is one of the factors we take seriously. We want a customer to have the same sound and vision experience regardless of which theatre they go to.

'IMAX is a six-channel discrete sound system plus sub-bass. This means our soundtracks are custom-mastered to work with our theatres, with the filmmaker. In other systems, the cinema sound has to work at drive-ins and all other

auditoriums on the one mix; the worst and the best. In our situation, it is mixed to a very specific standard, with ten times the dynamic range of other systems and our loudspeakers have the ability to take care of that.'

So, how deep can the speakers go?

'Our minus 3dB point is 20Hz. Yeah, it is very low. The loudspeakers, both the sub-bass and the full-range systems, are custom-designed and manufactured by IMAX. They are designed to fit our theatres. So we have separate systems, depending upon the room and its volume. We have different systems for different-sized

rooms. The rooms are acoustically treated and we have a proprietary acoustical standard that works with our post-production audio mastering standard.

'We manage our sub-bass differently. All our speakers are full-range, even the surrounds. The amplifiers are made to our specifications, custom-designed for our environment.'

This might seem simplistic, as the building has to be part of it, but what is the cost of an IMAX screen, sound and projection system?

'We don't sell a projection system, or a sound system, it's always a full package and sometimes it is a joint venture with a client, so there are a lot of different factors in that equation.'

So what about the tuning of the room?

'That's the 'Secret Sauce'. In particular, with our digital systems, we have developed a new tuning system called NEXOS. It utilises the Audyssey MultEQ tuning algorithms but modified for us by Audyssey. It has gone well beyond MultEQ. We have exclusive rights for applications in cinema. We worked extensively with Audyssey to modify performance specifically for theatrical venues for the sort of volumes we are talking about. In addition, it uses our very own customised EQ curve, that we have spent forty years developing and optimising.

'Coupled with that is our own technology, which is patent pending. We employ permanently-mounted microphones in the theatre at numerous key locations.

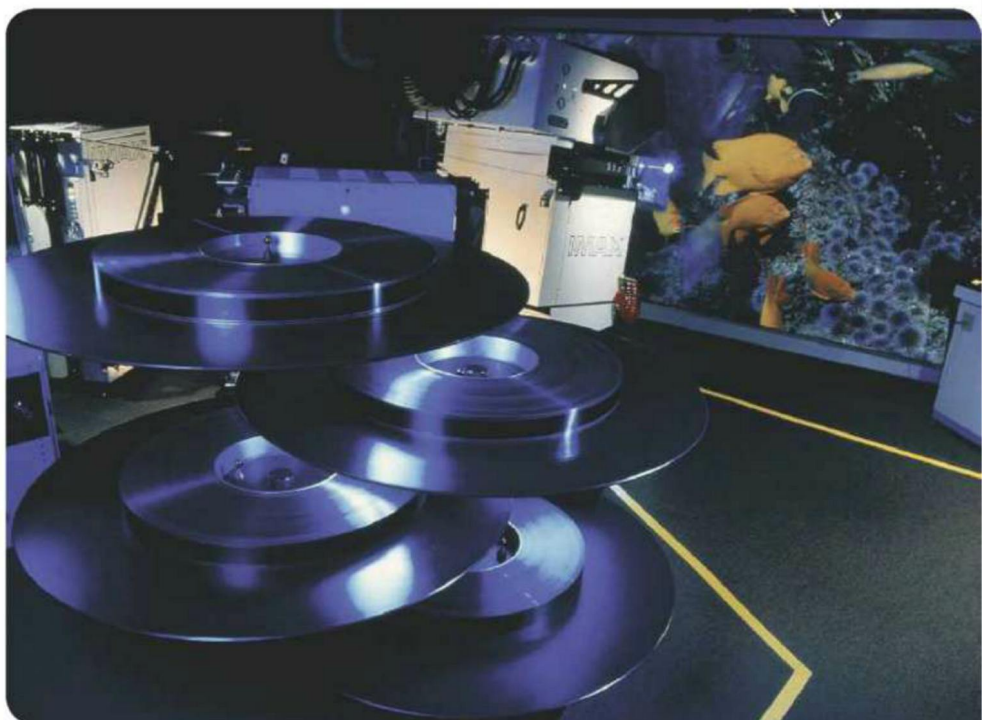
'They collect real-time acoustic information that reports back to our Image & Audio Enhancer audio engine. It's a super-computer with the power of about a hundred desktop computers. It does multiple things with audio and visual – it monitors performance, it can alert us to speaker degradation that happens with age. If a driver were to fail, it is capable of recognising that and through our network operations centre, which is connected to our systems via the internet, it will give us an alert.'

So if a woofer dies in Uxbridge, it'll tell the computer back in Toronto that it needs to be replaced?

'Exactly. There are a couple of options, depending upon what the failure mode is. Say, a subwoofer driver has failed. We have the option of boosting the gain of the remaining subs temporarily, to bring things back in spec. In the meantime, we will send a service agent to replace the driver. A customer will be none the wiser.'

There was something else, about inter-continental remote control?

'Yes, movies are mixed to an 85dBc standard. [That's eighty five decibels, 'C' weighted – it means pretty damn loud]. We want to make sure that everything is played back at 85dBc nominal, compliant to that. You are going to have films where the customer thinks it's too loud and the



The images crafted from IMAX's projector systems, including its dual-format 3D-chucker (right), are monitored via industrial cameras to ensure optimum performance



The BFI IMAX on London's South Bank hosted a sneak teaser preview of *Star Trek Into Darkness*



theatre operator will turn it down. That happens and you have to allow that to take place. The problem with that is the theatre operator forgets to turn it back up. So, for the next days or for however long, the soundtrack is not being played the way the filmmaker intended. Our network system has the ability to recognise whatever it is they have done. We receive that as an alert and typically before the next performance, they will have a phone call from us.

'We're currently in development of our next-generation sound system, which is going to be nine-channel'

'We also have an optical-grade industrial camera doing the same thing for the vision. It looks at the screen as if it was your eyes. To be the best in the industry, we have to be able to maintain our systems. We monitor over 3,000 pieces of equipment. I can tell you the temperature of the processor on the motherboard of our main computer. I don't use that data every day but it helps us with diagnostics.

'So, NEXOS gives us feedback and allows us to tune the theatre a little differently to how others do it. We use up to twenty separate frequency/time based readings, at hundreds of frequency points, not just thirty-one. We then allow the computer to manipulate that data but it is always verified by a human judgement, by an engineer, listening. All these things working together add up to the experience of hearing what the film maker intended to be heard.'

Dolby has released Atmos. Does IMAX have anything new, sound-wise?

'We are in development right now of our next-generation sound system, which is going to be a nine-channel system. It will still be based on discrete channel technology, with extra channels added in a very specific way. We are adding two more speakers on the side wall. So, in our environment, we have front left, centre and right, with another centre channel loudspeaker high up, we call The Voice Of God, as our screens are so tall. Then we have two rears. We do not employ the use of surrounds, where you'll have ten loudspeakers starting on the sidewalls and going all the way around the back. Primarily because that gives you a 'wash' of sound. You cannot pinpoint a sound from the array of loudspeakers.

'We use Proportional Point Source Sound technology. In most theatres, the 'sweet spot' hovers around the centre of the room. In our loudspeaker design, we take this into account and our horns emit greater energy to more distant seats and lesser to closer seats. By that, we manage to enlarge the sweet spot to cover the whole theatre, to within a dB.'

IMAX AT HOME

Check out these Blu-ray releases that go large

The Dark Knight Rises



Christopher Nolan's final part of his Batman trilogy upped the IMAX quota on its predecessor by including around an hour of IMAX-shot material, presented on Warner's BD release at 1.78:1 (cropped from its original 1.44:1 but still clearly separate from the other 2.40:1 35mm footage).

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen



Fighty robot fans in the US were treated to a special Big Screen edition Blu-ray of this 2009 blockbuster, incorporating a handful of action scenes filmed with 70mm IMAX cameras. It's a region-free release, so can be imported if you only have an R2 player.

TRON: Legacy



The long-awaited sci-fi sequel was filmed digitally using 3D rigs, but around 40 minutes was then expanded for IMAX cinemas using the company's Digital Re-Mastering wizardry. The BD release automatically switches aspect ratio (from 2.35:1 to 1.78:1) for these mind-blowing sequences.

If we asked you what the crucial IMAX difference was, how would you put it?

'It's not one thing that differentiates IMAX. If it was, people could copy that. We made a mistake many years ago, sort of a marketing thing, where we were quoting 12,000 Watts or 20,000 Watts. At that time we were marketing on the piece of technology, rather than the experience. It's the sum of all the little factors. One of the big ones is that environment. We have taken a lot of interest in making sure the room is acoustically treated to work with IMAX.'

What about new build projects?

'We have a set of standard geometries – just the shape of the box. No walls parallel, like in a recording studio. We work with the exhibitor and their acoustical consultant. We supply the performance figures their room must adhere to and they have to go out and hire an acoustical consultant to make that happen. We will help if they have difficulties. We expect them to prepare the build to our specifications.'

What would be your favourite IMAX cinema experience?

'Oh boy... I'm an audio guy going years back, so I always tell people that the sound has greater value than the visuals and the sound makes the movie look better. I think *The Dark Knight* had a great soundtrack. *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*, I liked that soundtrack, too. They both really exercised the system. The subs were going full power. I find that when my body palpitates because of the sound...

The very first digitally remastered film we did, *Apollo 13*... it was like someone had strapped the microphone right on the rocket ship. I felt like I was at a rock concert. At IMAX, we are trying to recreate reality and take you somewhere you have never been before and this to me was such a fantastic representation of that experience.'

And last of all, I myself have a particular interest in low-frequency transducers. What can you tell me about your woofer drivers?

'They have a big Xmax or linear travel, four drivers per cabinet, in custom-ported designs with up to eight cabinets, depending upon the size of the theatre. There is a substantial amount of sub-bass to provide full range when you need it. We make sure you have the horsepower. We used to use eighteen-inch subs but when we made the transition from analogue to digital, we found that filmmakers were really cranking the top end for loudness and they were pushing it to ridiculous volume levels. We peak at 118dB continuous. Normally, it'll be a 118dB peak for a moment. The trailer for *TRON: Legacy* for example... Just about every analogue system has undergone upgrades as they were never designed to take that sort of amplitude over that length of time. A filmmaker can run for ten minutes at maximum volume if they like, although we try to talk film makers out of that...' ■

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing
home cinema on a
DIY basis may leave
the system performing
at way below its
optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Kingston-upon-Thames

INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick.
020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street. 01603 627134
www.martinshifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street. 01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

Tunbridge Wells

KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough.
01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

Solihull

MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road.
0121 742 0254
www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info



STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
SERVICE ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
FACILITIES ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
VERDICT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

...Talk to the experts

THE hi-fi SHOW

The ultimate high-end hi-fi experience *Live*

Every enthusiast dreams of the chance to enjoy the sound of the world's best hi-fi systems, presented by the industry's most respected professionals. That dream will become a reality at the inaugural Hi-Fi Show, brought to you by the trusted audiophiles behind *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* and *Hi-Fi Choice* magazines.

In a refreshing departure from the conventional show format, visitors will be treated to a series of memorable high-end audio experiences. Each of our major suites will feature examples of the very

best that the high-end can offer with scheduled presentations and demonstrations by a mix of famous designers, recording engineers and audio personalities. Our other suites will offer interactive demonstrations of the best headphones and headphone amplifiers, heavyweight vinyl and hi-res digital media plus the very highest quality accessories available.

For up-to-the-minute information on exhibiting brands, advance ticketing and other announcements, please visit our website.



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Greece – Hxos Eikova
Hungary – Sztereo Sound & Vision
Italy – AUDIOreview
Norway – Watt
Poland – Audio
Portugal – Audio & Cinema em Casa
Russia – Stereo & Video
Serbia – Hi-Files
Spain – AV Premium
Sweden – HiFi & Musik
Ukraine – Stereo & Video

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SUPPORTERS OF THE HI-FI SHOW 2013



PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **CLOUD ATLAS** Blockbuster meets art house in the Wachowski's genre-jumping epic **PARKER** Jason Statham is out for revenge. Again **LINCOLN** Spielberg shines a spotlight on the President's final months **BLOW OUT** De Palma's cult conspiracy thriller restored **THE GREAT ESCAPE** Boxing Day favourite goes Blu **MAMA** Hi-def horror hits home **AND MUCH MORE!**



Yippee ki-yay!

A Good Day to Die Hard → 20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD

John McClane is back in action as the fifth instalment in the *Die Hard* franchise explodes onto Blu-ray. Find out how it measures up to the rest of the series on p98.

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Each of the actors in *Cloud Atlas* plays a different character in each of the six stories



Making the impossible possible

Three movie-makers transform an unfilmable novel into the first \$100million art house blockbuster

→ CLOUD ATLAS

Six stories. Three directors. One unfilmable novel. *Cloud Atlas* should be an absolute mess. Only, it's not. Instead, *Cloud Atlas* is an ambitious \$100million mix of blockbuster spectacle and art house ambition – the likes of which we'll probably never see again.

You want the plot? Okay: in 1849 a young lawyer tries to help a stowaway slave while battling with infection by a parasitic worm. In 1936 a bisexual musician flees to Edinburgh to work with composer Vyvayan Ayrs on his masterpiece. In San Francisco in 1973 a journalist uncovers a terrifying nuclear conspiracy. In 2012 a publisher finds himself tricked into being confined to a nursing home. In 2144 a genetically-engineered clone discovers the bitter truth about the fate of her kind. And in an unspecified future, a survivor of 'The Fall' must face up to his worst fears...

Directors Tom (*Run Lola Run*) Tykwer and Andy and Lana Wachowski (*The Matrix* trilogy) certainly had their work cut out transforming David Mitchell's time-hopping, genre-spanning novel into a film. But, by honing in on the central themes (freedom, love, how our actions impact on one another through time) and directly intercutting between the various time periods, the trio have conjured up a uniquely cinematic experience. Love it or loathe it, *Cloud Atlas* is a film that needs to be seen.

Picture: Warner Home Video's hi-def treatment of *Cloud Atlas* is very impressive indeed. Despite the amount of video content squeezed onto the disc,

there's absolutely no sign of serious technical wobbles such as artefacts or digital noise.

What you do get is a bold, colour-saturated AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode that excels when it comes to fine textures and subtle graduations in hue and tone. Only the slightly elevated black levels, holding back the available shadow detail, stop *Cloud Atlas* from navigating its way to a perfect score.

Audio: *Cloud Atlas* comes to Blu-ray with an energetic and immersive DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtrack. Each of the six stories gives the sound mix something different to do – from the atmospheric ambience of the creaking interior of a 19th Century sailing ship to laser fire zipping around the soundfield as Sonmi-451 and Commander Hae-Joo Chang flee from pursuing soldiers in 22nd Century Neo Seoul. The attention to detail is excellent – a first-rate mix.

Extras: With *Cloud Atlas* clocking in at the best part of three hours, it's not exactly surprising to discover that this 50GB Blu-ray platter isn't over-burdened with bonus goodies.

The only material on offer is a collection of seven 'Focus Point' behind-the-scenes featurettes, with a combined running time of a little under 55 minutes. Here the three directors, the main actors and even author David Mitchell all get to chime in on various aspects of the film and the original novel, as well as the themes and concepts they deal with. It's all enjoyable and informative stuff – however, you will come away feeling that a film of this scale deserves a lot more attention.



HCC VERDICT

Cloud Atlas

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: A dizzying piece of cinematic spectacle served up on a platter that makes the film all the easier to admire

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

This is 40

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Judd Apatow's latest comedy had a pretty tough time with a lot of critics at cinemas, due to it being completely

out of touch with what turning 40 means to anyone who isn't a Hollywood millionaire. Honestly, we could care less. The only thing that matters is that (despite being about half-an-hour too long) *This is 40* is a very funny film that frequently had us in fits of laughter. The Blu-ray itself also managed to raise a smile with its proficient AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and bountiful selection of extras – although the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix could have been a lot more engaging.



Alex Cross

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£20 Approx



James Patterson's Alex Cross novels regularly top the bestseller lists around the world – and now Hollywood wants

a piece of the action. Ignoring the two earlier Morgan Freeman adaptations, *Alex Cross* reboots the franchise with a story every bit as generic as the film's title and a miscast Tyler Perry in the lead role. For all its flaws as a film, though, *Alex Cross* arrives on Blu-ray with an extremely accomplished HD presentation. Indeed, both the AVC-encoded 2.40:1 visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio are reference quality – although the film's so bad it's hard to give a damn.



Warm Bodies

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Romeo and Juliet gets yet another makeover in this teen flick about a zombie that rediscovers his sense of

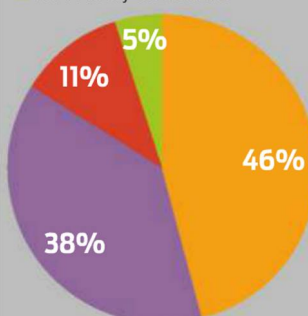
identity when he falls in love with a living girl. As unpromising as this sounds, *Warm Bodies* is a smarter and wittier film than you might expect – although the filmmakers have held back from giving it the full satirical bite the concept is capable of delivering. The Blu-ray itself is absolutely first-rate, thanks to a crystal-clear AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode and a nimble DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. Copious extras include a chat-track and seven behind-the-scenes featurettes.



WE ASKED...

Which is the best of the four *Die Hard* sequels?

- Die Hard 2: Die Harder
- Die Hard with a Vengeance
- Die Hard 4.0
- A Good Day to Die Hard



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Master criminal has revenge in mind

This effective crime thriller benefits from the star chemistry between J-Stath and J-Lo

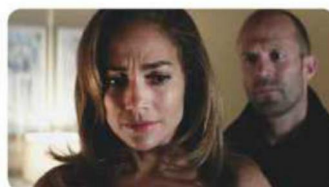
→ PARKER

Donald Westlake's series of 24 books about career criminal Parker have proved particularly popular with filmmakers over the past five decades. The likes of Lee Marvin (*Point Blank*), Mel Gibson (*Payback*), Jim Brown (*The Split*) and even Anna Karina (*Made in the USA*) have all starred as variations on Westlake's antihero over the decades – although, curiously, this latest adaptation is the first to keep the character's name from the books.

For anybody who has seen any of the earlier movies, the set-up here will be instantly familiar. Betrayed and left for dead by a gang of thieves he was working with, Parker (Jason Statham) is out for revenge as he tracks them down to Palm Beach. There he enlists the help of ditty realtor Leslie (Jennifer Lopez) in spoiling the gang's plan to rob a high-profile jewellery auction.

While it lacks the raw grit and icy machismo of John Boorman's celebrated *Point Blank*, there's still plenty to like here. Statham's gruff physicality suits the role to a tee and he and Lopez make a fun double-act. Meanwhile veteran director Taylor Hackford (*An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Proof of Life*) keeps the plot ticking along at a decent pace and delivers an astonishingly brutal fight scene in an apartment bathroom. All in all, it's an effective piece of pulp cinema.

Picture: Shot using the Red Epic digital camera, *Parker* cuts a very dashing figure on Blu-ray – particularly when it comes to clarity and detailing. However, the real highlight is the AVC 2.40:1 encode's gorgeous colour palette, with the sun-kissed Palm



HCC VERDICT

Parker

→ EntertainmentOne
→ Region B BD → £20 Approx

WE SAY: Despite the routine extra features, this is a solid Blu-ray outing for an enjoyable thriller

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Statham's role in *Brokeback 2* shocked many of his fans

Beach exteriors throwing up plenty of richly saturated primaries that pop off the screen.

Audio: *Parker*'s DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtrack is easily on a par with the disc's video presentation. Extremely well balanced, the track doesn't always go for the jugular in terms of dynamic effects, but it does a great job of creating a convincing 360-degree soundscape. Dialogue and music also play extremely well, and when the guns start firing, you'll find there's plenty of power lurking in the low-end.

Extras: The best of this Blu-ray's fairly meagre bunch of bonus features is an engaging audio commentary by veteran director Taylor Hackford. The only other extras the disc can muster up are a quartet of short promo featurettes (*Bringing the Hunter to Life: The Making of Parker*, *Who is Parker?*, *The Origin of Parker* and *Broken Necks and Bloody Knuckles*) – three of which don't even make it to the five-minute mark. There isn't even a J-Lo music video.

A bad day for fans of action movies

John McClane is off to kill people in Moscow – but after watching this Blu-ray you'll wish he hadn't bothered...



DEMO SCREEN...

A Good Day to Die Hard [Extended Cut]

Time code: 019.43 – 031.53



Streets of rage: The car chase through the streets of Moscow quickly puts the clarity and sharpness of the Blu-ray's AVC encode to the test with its fast-paced action and editing.



Range rover: The contrast between the sharp ripping of metal against metal and the bass-driven rumble of the truck's engine highlights the superb range inherent in the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack.



Crash and burn: Naturally, the bad guys refuse to play fair and bring a rocket launcher into the action. The resulting explosion and crash rocks your home cinema with some truly remarkable low-end heft.



Flippin' heck: As the villains' truck lands on the back of a taxi, it flips it up into the air – with the transparency of the 7.1 channel mix following it seamlessly as it somersaults over you.



→ A GOOD DAY TO DIE HARD

The original *Die Hard* is one of the best action movies ever made, something which makes the utterly generic nature of this fourth sequel all the more harder to stomach. *A Good Day to Die Hard* isn't an absolute clanger – there are a couple of standout action scenes and the script is certainly no more stupid or poorly plotted than your typical *Die Hard* aspirant. But there's the rub: this isn't some *Under Siege*-style wannabe, it's a genuine *Die Hard* sequel and – rightly or wrongly – John McClane fans expect so much more.

Picture: *A Good Day to Die Hard* was shot on 35mm film, but it's been put through such heavy colour-grading and digital manipulation in post-production that you'd be hard-pressed to know it.

Framed at 1.85:1, the AVC-encoded 1080p Blu-ray transfer does its best with the film's gritty, teal and orange-tinted visuals, but ultimately it can't find sharpness, clarity and detail where there simply wasn't any in the first place. Annoyingly, there are some close-ups in the film (such as the golden-hued father-son chat in Chapter 17) that show the kind of intricate detailing that the encode is capable of. But it's rarely given the chance to shine in this way.

What you're left with is a image that accurately captures the source material, but is hamstrung by the aesthetic choices the filmmakers made.

Audio: If nothing else, this latest *Die Hard* film certainly delivers in the audio department.

The Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix starts off a little low-key, but once the bomb explodes outside the courthouse in Chapter 6 it never looks back. The car chase (see below left) is a masterpiece of high-intensity full-soundfield sound design, and every single gunshot (of which there are plenty) is accompanied by a thunderous blast of bass and precise spatial positioning. In other words, blockbuster audio at its room-quaking best.



Extras: Being a dreadful movie, it's only natural that *A Good Day to Die Hard* hits Blu-ray with a fantastic collection of bonus features.

Not only does the disc include the original US theatrical cut (rather than the sanitised version that played at UK cinemas), but it also adds an alternate extended cut. This new 101-minute version crams in a few new character beats and improves the editing in a handful of action scenes, and eliminates the two sequences book-ending the film featuring Lucy McClane (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). This last fact is one of the very few elements of the production not touched on in the chatty audio commentary that director John Moore and assistant director Mark Cotone recorded for the extended cut.

Making it Hard to Die is an hour-long, 15-part *Making of...* doc that covers everything from stunts and special effects to editing and colour grading (where they try to make turning everything teal and orange into an artistic statement). Further behind-the-scenes info can be found in four additional featurettes looking at the cast and the filming of the car chase.

Also on hand are seven deleted scenes, three pre-vis reels (including animatics for an unfilmed alternate opening), 16 visual effects breakdowns, storyboards for five sequences, six concept art galleries and a pair theatrical trailers. Finally, there's a three-minute highlight package of clips from the previous *Die Hard* films – which only helps demonstrate how far the franchise has fallen.



The carrot-munching Alik (above) is no Hans Gruber, that's for sure



Bruce Willis and Jai Courtney spot the screenwriter during a break in filming



HCC VERDICT

A Good Day to Die Hard: Harder Extended Cut

→ 20th Century Fox

→ Region A/B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Reference-quality audio or not, this is one action franchise we wish had been left to die (hard)

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Injustice: Gods Among Us

Warner Bros. Interactive → Xbox 360/PS3/Wii U → £40 Approx



Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Superman – and he wants to kick your ass in this latest beat 'em up from the developer responsible for 2011's *Mortal Kombat* reboot. And, clearly buoyed by the outlandish combat opportunities provided by having players take control

of a bevy of DC Comics' superheroes including Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Arrow and Flash, NeatherRealm Studios has developed what may well be the best one-on-one brawler ever crafted outside of Japan.

Like the studio's earlier *Mortal Kombat* game, *Injustice: Gods*

Among Us goes out of its way to be completely accessible to beat 'em up novices and deliver a surprisingly deep campaign mode to ensure that the single-player experience is just as much fun as multiplayer battles. Indeed, the gameplay is incredibly easy to pick up, and before you know it you'll be pulling off complex combos and wacky special moves (watching the Batmobile roar onto screen and run over an opponent never gets dull).

Injustice... also makes a pretty heroic impression when played in a home cinema environment. The hi-def graphics are razor-sharp, beautifully detailed and silky smooth in motion, while the expansive soundstage positively thrives on a diet of punishing punches, enormous explosions and inventive atmospheric effects.



Dead Island: Riptide

Deep Silver → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £35 Approx



There appear to be two basic points of view when it comes to making a sequel to a popular videogame. The first is to use it as an opportunity to address the strengths and weaknesses of the original game in order to build on its success and provide gamers with an even richer and more engrossing experience. The second



is to use it as an excuse to simply give gamers more of the same. Take a peek at the star rating at the bottom of this review and see if you can guess which of these two approaches Polish developer Techland has taken with *Dead Island: Riptide...*

Picking up directly after the end of the original *Dead Island*, this sequel quickly strands its clichéd cast of characters on yet another tropical island overrun by the undead. And while there a few new types of zombies to kill, plenty of new weapons play with, plus a new gameplay wrinkle that forces you to defend a base from zombie hordes at key moments in the story, ultimately it's just more of the same repetitive mix of zombie killing and fetch-and-carry quests. Heck, most of the technical glitches from the first game remain unfixed here. All of which means that *Dead Island: Riptide* feels less like a true sequel than a piece of DLC (downloadable content) for the original game that has somehow been granted a life of its own on shop shelves as a full-price release.



Doctor Who: The Mind of Evil

BBC Worldwide → R2 DVD
£20 Approx



Now here's a fitting way of celebrating *Doctor Who*'s 50th anniversary. Not only is *The Mind of Evil* the last John Pertwee story to be released on DVD, but this release is also the

first time the six episodes have been seen in colour in decades (see p14 for how and why). The recolourisation is generally impressive – especially Stuart Humphryes' work on episode one – although the quality varies from episode to episode. The two-disc set also includes the usual fine array of extra features.



Veep: The Complete First Season

HBO Home Entertainment
All-region BD → £35 Approx



It may not be quite as sharp or foul-mouthed as *The Thick of It*, but Armando Iannucci still manages to mine plenty of laughs from the sour heart of the political world with his first

US sitcom. And as we've come to expect from HBO, this two-disc Blu-ray release is a very slick operation, delivering attractively sharp and bright AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes and cleanly-rendered DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes for all eight episodes. The set also includes some excellent extras including 12(!) cast and crew episode commentaries, a 14-minute *Making of...* and deleted scenes.



The Newsroom: The Complete First Season

HBO Home Entertainment
All-region BD → £45 Approx



Aaron Sorkin's latest show explores what would happen if a TV news programme decided to stop chasing ratings in order to report genuine news stories. Just like his earlier hit, *The West*

Wing, it makes for provocative, engaging and very funny (if somewhat idealised) television drama of the highest calibre. This four-disc release delivers strong AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes (although the pilot was shot on super-grainy 16mm), modest DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics and some enlightening extra features.

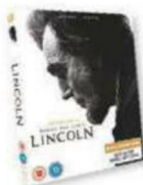




A visit to the theatre with the Lincolns.
What could possibly go wrong?

Portrait of an American President

Steven Spielberg's take on Abraham Lincoln is as much a legal thriller as it is a traditional biopic



→ LINCOLN

No 'mere' biopic of that most famous of American Presidents, Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* is the third in a loose trilogy of films about race that the filmmaker has made over the past three decades (the others being 1985's *The Color Purple* and 1997's *Amistad*).

With filmmakers like D.W. Griffiths and John Ford having already explored 'honest' Abe's formative years, Spielberg focuses his movie on the final four months of Lincoln's life – specifically the President's attempt to have the Thirteenth Amendment (outlawing slavery) passed through Congress.

While the narrative plays out against the backdrop of the Civil War, those looking for epic battle scenes should hunt elsewhere. Outside of the film's brutal opening skirmish and a later look at the aftermath of a battle, Spielberg's film casts its spotlight on the part the President played in the backroom deals and political manoeuvring that led to the amendment being passed. Or, as Radical Republican leader Thaddeus Stevens so neatly put it: 'The greatest measure of the Nineteenth Century. Passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America'.

Naturally, a film of this type lives or dies by the quality of its cast – and in this regard it's an unqualified success. Daniel Day-Lewis unsurprisingly received most of the kudos for his portrayal of the President, but he's easily matched by an incredible



The Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack really brings the Senate sequences to life



HCC VERDICT

Lincoln

→ 20th Century Fox

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A top-tier 1080p encode helps Spielberg's engrossing political drama shine on its Blu-ray debut

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

supporting cast that includes Tommy Lee Jones, David Strathairn, Lee Pace, Sally Field, Jared Harris and James Spader. Spielberg, meanwhile, is content to remain a quiet observer of the drama that unfolds, allowing conversations to play out in lengthy takes and refusing to impart any obvious directorial 'style' onto the proceedings.

Picture: Shot entirely with available light sources (or approximations thereof) for added authenticity, you'd be hard pressed to argue that *Lincoln* was a particularly colourful or striking film. However, that doesn't mean that Fox's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is anything less than an impressive experience.

Janusz Kaminski's moody cinematography is beautifully recreated on Blu-ray, capturing the expert play of light and shadow with no sign of any technical imperfections. Black levels are as accurate as you could hope or and – despite the frequently muted nature of the imagery – the encode still manages to deliver the intricate textures and minute details inherent in the original footage.

Audio: The 'talky' nature of the film means that *Lincoln*'s DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix isn't the most dynamic you'll ever hear. Outside of surrounding you with braying politicians in the Senate, the surrounds are only really used for atmospheric effects and to allow John Williams' score to swell around you.

Extras: Included on this Blu-ray are the theatrical trailer and six featurettes. Thankfully, these are no simple EPK off-cuts and – despite their relative brevity – together create a worthwhile account of how the film was brought to the screen.



De Palma frequently uses split diopter lenses to startling effect during the course of the film (above)



DISC
OF THE
MONTH

Travolta's truth is out there

Surrender to the sound of suspense with Brian De Palma's electrifying 1981 thriller

→ BLOW OUT

While out recording ambient effects one night, sound technician Jack Terry (John Travolta) becomes convinced that he's accidentally recorded a political assassination. In a desperate attempt to uncover the truth he enlists the help of the only survivor of the 'accident' (Nancy Allen), unaware that he is putting both their lives in even greater danger.

Despite being no less derivative than his previous work (this time the point of reference is Antonioni rather than Hitchcock), this meticulously-crafted thriller stands out as arguably the best film Brian De Palma ever made. Smartly plotted, surprisingly cynical and bolstered by excellent performances from Travolta and Allen, *Blow Out* is a fantastic thriller with a truly killer punch line.

Picture: For this UK outing, Arrow Video licensed the same 2K restoration that Criterion utilised for its 2011 release. The only noticeable difference between the two is a slightly brighter look to Arrow's higher bitrate AVC 2.40:1 1080p incarnation.

Otherwise it's business as usual for anyone who has had the pleasure of seeing Criterion's release. Grain retention is expertly handled, fine object detail is excellent, colours look superb and contrast levels are rock-solid throughout. It's hard to imagine that this cracking film could look any better.

Audio: Sound plays a major part in *Blow Out*, so it was vital that this Blu-ray captured every inflection of the film's original audio design. In that regard this Blu-ray's LPCM 2.0 mix (no 5.1 here) is a complete



HCC VERDICT

Blow Out

→ Arrow Video → Region B BD
→ £20 Approx

WE SAY: A fantastic hi-def package for a superior thriller and one of the highlights of the Arrow Video line-up

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

success. There's a surprising clarity and range to the film's multilayered design, while the tonal range of the mix ensures that Pino Donaggio's score sounds delightfully melodramatic. Dialogue is clean and natural throughout.

Extras: While Arrow Video looked to the Criterion Collection for the source material, the distributor turned elsewhere (specifically to Carlotta Films' French Blu-ray release) for the supplementary material.

The downside to this is that we miss out on the 58-minute interview with De Palma and the 1080p presentation of the filmmaker's experimental 1967 feature *Murder à la Mod* that appeared on the Criterion platter. We'll have to wait and see if the latter at least gets its own standalone release as part of Arrow's growing Brian De Palma collection.

In their place we get a 28-minute interview with cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond (*Black and White in Colour*), a 21-minute interview with Nancy Allen (*Rag Doll Memories*), a 19-minute interview with producer George Litto (*Return to Philadelphia*), a 28-minute interview with composer Pino Donaggio (*Multitracking Blow Out*), the original theatrical trailer and a gallery of ten behind-the-scenes stills by photographer Louis Goldman.

The accompanying booklet features a new essay on the film by critic Michael Atkinson, plus a full transcript of a discussion between Brian De Palma and Quentin Tarantino (a small clip from which was used in the 1994 BBC *Omnibus* documentary *Quentin Tarantino: Hollywood's Boy Wonder*).

For Love's Sake

Third Window Films → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Now in his third decade as a filmmaker, Takashi Miike shows no signs of slowing down or curbing his genre-hopping ways.

This time around he's transformed a popular mid-'70s manga series about two star-crossed lovers into a live-action musical. In the process, Miike appears to have rediscovered his more playful edge, mixing edgy violence and tongue-in-cheek musical numbers with an eclectic and striking visual style. Given how exquisitely the Blu-ray's 2.40:1 1080p encode handles the film's imagery, the only real issue with this disc is the surprisingly front-heavy nature of its DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix.



Les Misérables

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



This suitably epic screen adaptation of the hit West End musical definitely gets the most out of this hi-def platter.

The opening act's frequently dark and gloomy imagery reveals a wealth of fine detail in close-ups, while the second half of the film is awash with golden hues. Fans of the production will also savour the director's commentary and hour-long *Making of...* documentary. However, it's the DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack that really dazzles – not just in the big musical numbers (although they sound fantastic), but through its forceful employment of the entire speaker array.



Gone in 60 Seconds

Kaleidoscope Home Entertainment
Region B BD → £18 Approx



Shot on a shoestring by writer/director/star/producer H.B. 'Toby' Halicki, this 1974 flick may lack the budget

of the blockbuster 2000 remake, but still features one of the biggest and most fondly-remembered car chases ever filmed. Given the film's lo-fi roots, it's hardly surprising that the AVC 1.85:1 encode looks fairly worn and grainy, but it is an accurate representation of the source material. Audio comes in both LPCM 2.0 and DTS-HD MA 2.0 flavours. Sadly, the chat-track from the US release isn't included, but you do get a 45-minute tribute to Halicki and five interviews.



Foxy Brown

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£20 Approx



From its 007-inspired opening credits to Foxy's final squirm-inducing revenge, Jack Hill's 1974 blaxploitation

hit remains an absolute blast. Key to this is Pam Grier's electrifying performance as Foxy Brown, which helps paper over the myriad plot deficiencies and cements the film's place as a *bona fide* genre classic. Arrow Video's BD boasts an authentically grainy and colourful AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode and a pleasingly clear LPCM 2.0 soundtrack. And while the lack of input from Grier in the disc's extras is a shame, the commentary and interviews included on the disc are well worth checking out.



Sadly, there's no escaping the facts...

...this Blu-ray outing for the WWII flick isn't quite as great as we'd hoped it would be

→ THE GREAT ESCAPE

No matter how many times you've sat through it on TV on Boxing Day afternoons, *The Great Escape*'s combination of an unbeatable ensemble cast, inspirational true-story origin and *that* motorbike stunt ensure its place as one of the greatest WWII adventures ever filmed. Don't argue.

Picture: In the build-up to its release, there was lots of talk about this Blu-ray release being based on a 4K scan of the film. However, what nobody thought to ask – and what MGM has been reticent to answer – is what exactly it was a scan of. Because, having seen the disc projected on a ten-foot wide screen, it's impossible to believe that it was a scan of the original camera negatives.

While it's far from being the complete disaster some have made it out to be, it's obvious this AVC 2.35:1 1080p encode doesn't present the film in its best light. Admittedly, there are a lot of optical dissolves in the movie that would automatically effect the image quality, but even that doesn't account for the poorly resolved grain or the softness inherent throughout the image.

There's also a serious issue with the overall consistency of the encode. Image quality varies significantly (the worst offender being the 4th of July celebrations in Chapters 18 and 19), almost as if various different source elements – some many generations removed from the original negatives – had been stitched together.

With all of this in mind, as we said at the top, it's not a disaster. The film is still completely watchable – particularly on screen sizes under 50in, where



Altogether now:
'Dum-dum, der-der-dum...'



many of the problems may go unnoticed. However, when compared to the kind of restorations classic films have been treated to on Blu-ray, it feels like a missed opportunity.

Audio: *The Great Escape* hits Blu-ray with a DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack that we imagine is not too far removed from the film's original four-track stereo mix. Most of the audio is focused on the front soundstage, with effective stereo separation present during some of the key scenes.

Extras: This Blu-ray's bonus features are all taken from MGM's old Special Edition DVD. There's a piecemeal commentary edited together from various interviews with the director and stars, plus a wide selection of featurettes and documentaries looking at how the movie was made, plus the people and events that inspired it. The disc also includes the theatrical trailer, which is the only extra presented in hi-def.

HCC VERDICT

The Great Escape

→ MGM/20th Century Fox
→ All-region BD → £18 Approx
WE SAY: This otherwise well-specced disc is sadly let down by its less-than-stellar 1080p video presentation

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Bigger doesn't always mean better

This is one 'Mama' who definitely won't be winning any Mother of the Year awards...

→ MAMA

In 2008 Andy and Bárbara Muschietti shot a Spanish-language short film about two young girls and a ghostly mother figure. This highly-effective three-minute shocker soon caught the attention of Guillermo del Toro, and before long he was executive producing this feature-length extension of the short.

Sadly, in padding the material out to 100 minutes, the Muschietti's have lost the simple effectiveness of their original. In its place we have a rather meandering tale of two young girls abandoned in a forest cabin, who are raised by a spectral entity they call Mama – which then follows them to their new home when they're found and rescued by an uncle.

What follows isn't as scary as we'd hoped and is a little too fond of unconvincing CG wizardry. But, at the same time, there's a unique fairy tale quality to *Mama* that marks it out as something quite different to your usual run-of-the-mill Hollywood ghost story.

Picture: Universal's Blu-ray release replicates the deliberately monochromatic look of the film very well. Blacks are deep and true, whites are crisp and shadow delineation is quite good.

A slight drop in definition in a few sequences ultimately holds the AVC 1.85:1 1080p imagery back from reaching the top tier of hi-def encodes. But, overall it remains a commendable effort.

Audio: *Mama*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix does everything you'd expect for a film of this type. Aggressive deployment of unexpected sounds in the surround



speakers? Check. Threatening bass rumbles? Check. Urgent music that builds to a terrifying crescendo? Check. In fact, there's barely a moment – outside of a couple of

instances of dialogue getting a little lost in the mix – where the track ever puts a foot wrong.

Extras: The most interesting of the extras by far is Andy and Bárbara Muschietti's original spooky short that inspired this feature-length outing (with an introduction from Guillermo del Toro and an optional commentary from the filmmakers).

Also included are six deleted scenes (again, with optional commentary), a couple of brief behind-the-scenes featurettes and a chat-track for the main feature by the Muschietti's.

HCC VERDICT

Mama

→ Universal Pictures
→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: This flawed but interesting ghost story manages to scare up some top-notch AV thrills on Blu-ray

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The Brood

Second Sight → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Inspired by the breakdown of his first marriage, *The Brood* is basically David Cronenberg's take on *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Only – instead of boring custody hearings – Cronenberg gives us

a mother whose anger is personified in the form of murderous dwarves she grows in an external womb! While not as badly served on DVD as some of the director's other work from the same era, this BD's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode is a major step-up in quality, particularly when it comes to the colour accuracy and grain retention. It also includes five interviews – including a 13-minute chat with Cronenberg about his early flicks.

Motel Hell

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£20 Approx



Arrow Video unearths another gem from the MGM catalogue in the form of Kevin Connor's horror-comedy about

farmer Vincent Smith and his 'special' smoked meats. Given the miserable treatment *Motel Hell* received on DVD in the past, this Blu-ray's colourful AVC 1.85:1 encode is a revelation. The accompanying LPCM 2.0 soundtrack is less immediately exciting, but is a fine reproduction of the source elements. As usual Arrow has also cooked up some fantastic supplementary features including a commentary by the director, interviews and a look at what makes a great female horror baddie.

The Vampire Lovers

Shout Factory → All-region BD
(US Import) → £14 Approx



It hasn't received the same kind of TLC that Hammer has been giving its classic chillers on Blu-ray in the UK,

but this US hi-def outing for *The Vampire Lovers* is still worth importing. The AVC 1.85:1 1080p transfer exhibits minor damage and sparkles, but is a vast improvement on previous home releases. The disc also includes some choice extras include a commentary and a 20-min interview with the delightful Madeline Smith. Best of all, while Shout's discs are usually locked to Region A (as the sleeve on this one also states) our Blu-ray proved to be region-free! Check before you buy!





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NEW W9

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ZT65	60

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FT60	42, 47
WT65	47, 55

NEW FT60



NEW GT60



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Panasonic is taking TV to the next level with the new SMART VIERA TV line-up, which offers smart design, smart performance and smart content - such as BBC iPlayer, Facebook, Twitter & YouTube. Available in Plasma and LED; Panasonic VIERA cutting edge technologies bring you more choice when it comes to finding the TV that fits your lifestyle.

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LED TV

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 Also Available: YAMAHA RX-V373

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TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Sony KDL-40W905A** → £1,400

★★★★★

Flaunting the brand's new Triluminos edge LED lighting, this 40in set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. The 'Sense of Quartz' styling is a winner, too. Pricey, but worth it

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows

**Samsung UE46F8000** → £1,800 ★★★★★

The F8000 tops Samsung's LED lineup (if you exclude the £35,000 S9 Ultra HD set) and is a consistently good performer. Bright, vivid images married to a super-stylish design

**LG 84LM960V** → £22,500 ★★★★★

LG's debut Ultra HD (4K) TV is an eye-opening look at the future of home cinema technology, with upscaled BDs benefitting from the pixel push. Hardly cheap, though

**Philips 55PFL6007** → £1,700 ★★★★★

Not one of Philips' top-flight models, but this Passive 3D bigscreen is superb value for money. Imagery is consistently good and the slim-bezel design works wonders with the 55in panel

**Panasonic TX-P65VT65** → £3,400 ★★★★★

A bigscreen plasma with a wonderfully sleek design, this Viera excels with sharp dynamic images, but requires some calibration to calm down its ramped up presets

**Philips 46PFL9707** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Philips' second iteration of its Moth Eye screen technology continues to offer astonishing contrast. This set is at its best with 2D HD material, though: crosstalk with 3D is apparent

**Panasonic TX-L47DT65** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The first of Panasonic's new 2013 LED TVs impresses with bright, sharp images and Passive 3D. Twin-tuner functionality is a welcome addition to the Smart revolution

**Toshiba 40RL858** → £500 ★★★★★

An ideal set for a budget setup – there's no 3D on offer here, or Toshiba's CEVO processing, but the £500 ticket gets you a smart brushed aluminium trim and sharp HD images

**LG 50PA650T** → £500 ★★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for just £500 is hard to ignore, and LG's model rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart capabilities here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 70ins are also hitting the high street – and 84in 4K panels are also on the way. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and a higher energy consumption. There's also a more limited choice – with just Samsung, LG and Panasonic selling plasma TVs in the UK.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set currently on sale.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**Dracula**

This beautifully restored hi-def version of Hammer's 1958 classic finds the garlic-hater looking better than ever – and fang fans finally get to see footage cut by sensors that, until recently, was feared lost for good.

★★★★★

**Life of Pi 3D**

No point beating around the bush – Fox's new Blu-ray is the best 3D disc we've come across, Ang Lee's spectacular visuals proving mindblowing. Thumping 7.1 audio and good extras complete a great package.

★★★★★

**The Impossible**

This dramatisation of 2004's Indian Ocean Tsunami, starring Naomi Watts, is, naturally, grim in places, but the astonishing sound design and sun-bleached visuals will put a smile back on your face.

★★★★★

**Django Unchained**

Arguably Quentin Tarantino's best movie, and certainly his most gorgeous, *Django Unchained* arrives on BD with a breathtaking 2.40:1 transfer and robust 5.1 mix. Our only gripe is the pitiful extras.

★★★★★

**Zero Dark Thirty**

Kathryn Bigelow follows up *The Hurt Locker* with another slice of nail-biting military drama, this time based on the capture of Osama Bin Laden. Universal Pictures' Blu-ray looks, and sounds, great.

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 
Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★
Oppo's first deck for two years has been worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs should you want to lavish some of its processing power on lesser components. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. All hail the the new king of Blu!
- 
Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★
This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling talents, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. Classy
- 
Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★
This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out
- 
Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★
Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs
- 
Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★
Currently the most affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer
- 
Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★
As a 'transport' rather than a player, this universal Denon lacks built-in decoders and analogue outputs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded
- 
Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★
Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though
- 
Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★
Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though
- 
Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★
New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features
- 
Pioneer BDP-150 → £140 ★★★★★
Affordable considering its Super Audio CD playback, Pioneer's BDP-150 is a worthy choice if you can live without much in the way of Smart functionality

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation 3?: Sony's console ushered in the era of Blu-ray playback in 2006 and still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joypad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most traditional BD spinners.



DEMO DELIGHT

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive












At the top of everyone's shortlist

TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-HW50ES** → £3,000

★★★★★

Another compelling example of Sony's rediscovered obsession with quality and a model that no one in the market for a mid-range projector can afford to ignore. Your film collection is in safe hands here

**JVC X55** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more flexible, second-gen iteration of JVC's e-shift pixel-polishing wizardry, the X55 offers supreme clarity as well as an impressive contrast and near-faultless 3D presentation

**JVC X35** → £2,900 ★★★★★

The £3,000 price point is the hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is definitely worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so!

**SIM2 Nero 3D-1** → £13,000 ★★★★★

That this isn't SIM2's most expensive model says a lot about the premium projector brand. Yet the DLP-based 3D-1 is still an awe-inspiring beamer, with 3D a particular strength

**Runco LightStyle LS1** → £4,000 ★★★★★

With a price tag not usually seen on Runco PJs, the LS1 is an excellent choice for those who aren't interested in 3D. This 2D-only DLP model offers brilliant HD pics and ISF certification

**Epson EH-TW8100** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W (below)? Then save yourself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead

**Panasonic PT-AT6000E** → £2,900 ★★★★★

Panasonic's newest PJ is undeniably a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't even get any 3D spex bundled in the box...

**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. But it's a bit noisy

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

SONY

Home Cinema Projector Range

HW30



HW50



VW95



VW1000ES



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TOP 10 SPEAKERS

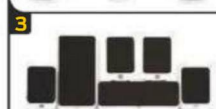
All prices are approx
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Wharfedale DX-1 HCP → £400


You can spend a fortune on a 5.1 speaker set, but those on tight budgets aren't ignored. Wharfedale's affordable package looks gorgeous and sounds fantastic, with its tight, fast subwoofer underpinning the satellites with ease


Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D → £2,000


This 5.1 set from B&W sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too


Q Acoustics Q2000i → £600


Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub


KEF R Series → £6,500


A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics


SVS Ultra 7.1 → £7,150


A big array (with both bookshelf and dipole designs), this is costly but definitely worth it. Deep, deep bass and soaring high-frequencies coming at you from all angles. Tasty


Acoustic Energy 3 Series 5.1 → £2,000


An easy-to-accommodate system using bookshelves both front and rear, this brilliantly built array creates a musical, cohesive soundfield backed up by an agile subwoofer


DALI Epicon 5.1 → £17,000


Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic


KEF T205 → £1,500

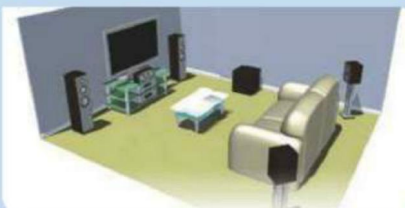

KEF's T Series brings high-quality sonics to your living room with the minimum of intrusion – these thin, flatpanel speakers are far more impressive than you might think


Monitor Audio MASS 5.1 → £800


Five angular satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms


KEF E305 5.1 → £900


The living room-friendly looks of KEF's newest set of 'eggs' will ensure they get a lot of fans, and sound quality, courtesy of the brand's Uni-Q driver array, is superb

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS


Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Gladiator: While it's often the low-end oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters



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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS/POWER AMPLIFIERS

All prices are approx
and may have changed

- 1 Denon AVR-4520 → £2,300 ★★★★★**
 Denon's flagship AV receiver sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. Build quality is high and its networking talents impressive
- 2 Sony STR-DA5700ES → £2,000 ★★★★★**
 Sony's STR-DA5700ES is unique among AVRs for offering both built-in Ethernet switching (handy) and video-on-demand (also handy). Flexible, good-looking... and it sounds fabulous
- 3 Onkyo TX-NR5010 → £3,000 ★★★★★**
 The top-of-the-range Onkyo warrants its £3,000 ticket by virtue of massive nine-channel power reserves and an extensive feature list. One for serious setups
- 4 Denon AVR-3313 → £1,100 ★★★★★**
 Sonic detailing is the order of the day here, with the Denon crafting soundstages with considerable finesse. Spotify, Denon Link HD and triple HDMI outputs are the feature highlights
- 5 Marantz AV8801 → £2,500 ★★★★★**
 The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance
- 6 Pioneer SC-LX86 → £2,000 ★★★★★**
 As the Japanese corp's top dog, the SC-LX86 is packed with features and built to last. Get to grips with its detailed setup process and you're in for multichannel thrills
- 7 Cambridge Audio Azur 751R → £1,600 ★★★★★★**
 Counting against the Azur 751R is its total lack of networking abilities and old-school interface, but its multichannel and stereo audio performance is hard to beat at this price
- 8 Marantz NR1603 → £550 ★★★★★★**
 The brand's second-gen 'slimline' AVR continues to offer brilliant streaming prowess and enough grunt for its target audience – but the lack of built-in Wi-Fi is annoying
- 9 Harman Kardon AVR 370 → £800 ★★★★★★**
 One of the most sultry-looking models on the market, HK's mid-ranger offers 8-in, 2-out HDMI hookup, AirPlay and a classy audio performance. The app and UI could be better, though
- 10 Pioneer SC-2022 → £900 ★★★★★★**
 Another Pioneer AVR that dazzles with its slick control features and crystal-clear audio presentation. But at this price you'd expect a second HDMI output

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V671 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-Ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-Ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.



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TOP 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 

Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers
- 

JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these!
- 

Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, warm bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too
- 

Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast
- 

REL T5 → £450 ★★★★★
The 8in T5 provides a slice of REL engineering at a surprisingly affordable price. Highlights include the simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and pleasing Class A/B sound
- 

Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
Possibly the coolest-looking subwoofer on the planet, B&W's revamped PV1 uses its DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class
- 

Velodyne DD18+ → £5,800 ★★★★★
If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification
- 

REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★
A top-of-the-range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth
- 

Q Acoustics 2070Si → £250 ★★★★★
A cracking value sub with a smart elongated-oblong design that may make it easier to fit in your room. Each of its 6.5in woofers are driven by a 75W amp
- 

SVS SB1000 → £500 ★★★★★
This sealed woofer squeezes a 12in driver into its small enclosure. Combined with the onboard 300W amp, it delivers a fast, deep performance that exceeds expectations at this price

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Jurassic Park: Steven Spielberg's dinosaur-packed blockbuster is rightly remembered for its cutting-edge CGI, but the surround sound mix is equally impressive. The Blu-ray release provides a perfect test for your subwoofer, with the ominous footfalls of the T-Rex so loud and low in the mix that you should find yourself as terrified as Jeff Goldblum's fast-talking mathematician. If you don't – well, you need a new woofer.

TOP 5 HD GAMES



Far Cry 3
An open-world first-person actioner, *Far Cry 3* feels like a breath of fresh air for the genre, with players equally likely to spend time hunting animals as following the kill-the-pirates narrative. Sensational.
★★★★★



Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Abandon all hope (of a life), ye who enter here. This third-person action RPG may not be the most visually impressive game around, but it will devour your every waking hour once started. Consider yourself warned...
★★★★★



BioShock Infinite
Irrational Games' sequel is a corker, offering a perfect mix of classy visuals, an engrossing narrative and, above all, superb gameplay. Start roaming the floating city of Columbia and you won't want to stop.
★★★★★



Dishonored
This first-person action-adventure puts you in the body of an assassin in a beautifully crafted steampunk world. Convincing characters and great sound design partnered with involving gameplay. We love it.
★★★★★



Tomb Raider
Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.
★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 **NEW ENTRY**
Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★
Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, Devolo's dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. Performance and build are excellent
- 2 **Western Digital WD TV Live Hub** → £200 ★★★★★
The WD's built-in 1TB hard drive explains the £200 ticket. This sleek-looking unit incorporates a faultless user interface and smartphone control, making media browsing a breeze
- 3 **PSB M4U1** → £220 ★★★★★
These closed-back 'phones are an excellent all-round offering – agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too
- 4 **Crystal Acoustics Media Matchbox** → £55 ★★★★★
A dinky media player that will happily play nearly everything you throw at it, including MKV, FLAC and BD/DVD ISO files. Pocket-sized, wallet-friendly and fuss free
- 5 **Philips Hue** → £180 ★★★★★
These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be a tad expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast
- 6 **Harman/Kardon BT Air** → £350 ★★★★★
Comfortable to wear and gorgeous to look at, Harman/Kardon's Bluetooth-capable (hence the BT moniker) headphones offer an enticing, rich performance that isn't overblown in the bass dept
- 7 **One For All Simple 4** → £22 ★★★★★
A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control, One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys
- 8 **NEW ENTRY**
Asheridge echoBox → £140 ★★★★★
An innovative alternative to Powerline Ethernet, the echoBox uses your home's coax cabling to shunt data, which could be ideal depending on your configuration. £140 gets you a pair of units
- 9 **DVDO Air** → £350 ★★★★★
Built around the WiDi standard, this wireless HD sender handles Full HD (including 3D) video and multichannel audio. Build quality and design is good, performance hard to fault
- 10 **Eminent EM7285** → £165 ★★★★★
Pricy, but heavy on features (including Wi-Fi, eSATA port, SD card slot and built-in BitTorrent client), Eminent's style-starved player also offers 'user-generated' apps that are worth a shufti

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season**

Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.

★★★★★

**Indiana Jones: The Complete Adventures**

Although the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restoration isn't the best we've seen, this is a box set that no home cinema fan can afford to be without. And ... *Temple of Doom* is uncut, too!

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**True Blood: The Complete Fifth Season**

More quality TV from HBO in a fan-pleasing BD box set. Imagery is commendable, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes are surprisingly forceful, and there are loads of extras to sink your fangs into.

★★★★★

**The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: Extended Edition**

Peter Jackson's box office-breaking trilogy simply dazzles in HD, and these extended cuts are perfect for Middle Earth maniacs. Watch the movies then savour the 26 hours of extras.

★★★★★

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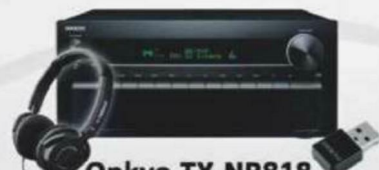
Yamaha RX-V673
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Graphite HDMI Lead

~~£534~~ **£399**



Marantz UD7007
Blu-Ray player

~~£999~~ **£629**



Onkyo TX-NR818
+ Free Yamaha Headphones
& Onkyo Wi-Fi Dongle

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Yamaha RX-V673
+ DALI ZENSOR 5 (5.1)

~~£1798~~ **£1319**



Denon AVR-X2000
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Denon AVR-X2000
+ DALI ZENSOR 5 (5.1)

~~£1798~~ **£1419**



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+ Q Acoustics 2000i (5.1)

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Starscape Fibre Optic & LED Lighting



Growing numbers of professional home cinema installers in the UK are turning to Starscape for fibre optic and LED solutions, not to mention our professional customers in Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, South Africa, the Czech Republic and South Africa.

Photo: Artcoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

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Top 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★



Sky+HD, £subscription

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★



Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★



Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★



Humax DTR-T1000, £300

The first ever YouView product was worth the lengthy wait – this is a fine example of how to integrate broadcast telly and IPTV. We can't wait for a larger 1TB version, with built-in Wi-Fi, to surface

★★★★★

Top 5 SOUNDBARS



Yamaha YSP-2200, £800

Launched back in 2011, but still part of the Yamaha lineup, this premium-priced 'Digital Sound Projector' offers very effective virtual surround, a separate 100W subwoofer and 3-in, 1-out HDMI switching

★★★★★



Sonos PlayBar, £600

Sonos' debut 'bar offers a hefty, spacious sound (although it doesn't come with a sub) and it can be easily added to an existing Sonos network for music-on-demand fun. Only connects to your TV via optical

★★★★★



Libratone Lounge, £1,100

Don't let the cashmere cover fool you – this AirPlay and DLNA-toting soundbar delivers a sound quality commensurate with the price tag. The lack of HDMI connectivity is a real let-down, though

★★★★★



Samsung HW-E450, £250

HDMI connectivity, wireless subwoofer hookup, Bluetooth streaming and USB file playback help this well-priced 'bar stand out from the crowd. Audio performance is solid, too – but lossless tracks aren't catered for

★★★★★



Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

Top 5 SYSTEMS



Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★



Samsung HT-F9750W, £1,500

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome sound; packed with features

★★★★★



Harman Kardon BDS470, £650

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★



LG BH8220B, £650

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★



Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA Choice

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

4K: Everything you need to know!

Dream theatres: The UK's best home cinema installs revealed

Giant TVs: Samsung 85in and Sony 65in Ultra HD sets put through their paces

→ ON TEST

Krell Foundation AV processor Loewe Orchestra 5.1 all-in-one Wharfedale Diamond 100-HCP SpeakerCraft soundbar Panasonic Blu-ray/HDD recorder 55in LED TV group test PLUS News, software, opinion, installs and more!

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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson has been at the calculator again, and worked out that a super-size TV may be financially preferable to a projector setup – and offer performance benefits, too

THE AVALANCHE OF super-sized TVs hitting the market this Summer has got me thinking about that lynch-pin of serious home cinema, the projector. These thoughts go along the lines of, 'how long before PJs are redundant in most installs?'

Let's face it, projectors are not exactly the perfect way to view a movie in the home. Not only are they expensive if you want a decent one, the quality of the projection screen and the ambient light in the room significantly affect picture performance. Want to enjoy *Mamma Mia* on a hot summer evening? Well, you better have the curtains closed or you won't see a great deal. Want to enjoy movies at low volume and hear the smallest of details? Shame about that projector fan noise. Then there is the relatively short life expectancy of expensive bulbs, high electricity bills, light overspill onto the ceiling and, in my installation at least, picture wobble if your hoofing great Labrador is walking around upstairs.

Not one of those issues would be a problem with a super-sized TV on the wall. Yet the stumbling block has been one of cost. **Massive TVs have boasted prices that limit their appeal to Premiership footballers**, making projectors the only affordable way of getting an 80in+ picture. But the key mid-price for projectors, around £4,000 plus a decent screen, is well and truly under threat by 70in and 80in LED screens coming onto the market.

In my room, a JVC DLA-X30 projects onto a 110in fixed frame screen. To be honest I have never been totally impressed with the JVC's picture, even after calibration. My old Marantz VP15-S2, with its DLP technology, was smoother and offered far more natural colours, even though the fan was beginning to sound like a hair dryer with dodgy bearings. I also needed 3D for testing purposes, so had to 'upgrade'.

The £5,000 I spent on the JVC and screen last year would today get me some very serious LED TV real estate. How about Sharp's 80in LC-80LE646, which is on offer for under £4,000, even though it's admittedly not 3D? Or, if you could live with dropping to a paltry 65in screen size, there are lots of very fine TVs available, most with 3D and Smart features and some with 4K. And, if you wanted the full monty and could spend a few dollars more, Samsung's über-lush 75in 9000 series ticks all the technology and style boxes and can be yours for under £7,000.

Room to breathe

Now I realise that 75in would be stepping down nearly three foot of screen acreage in my setup. Yet that might actually have some advantages in my living room. I could move the speakers a little further away from the side walls to let them breathe, and fullscreen action sequences would not require tennis-match like head movements from my 4m viewing distance. The screen could be watched any time of the day and would not dim over time.

Okay, with a large room and a large budget the projector route makes sense. Panasonic's 103in plasma is the same price as a basic Porsche 911 and spending a quarter of that on a high-end projector will get you an awesome picture up to several metres wide. But what will the PJ-versus-TV game of trumps look like in two year's time? Projectors and good screens won't be falling in price any time soon as they simply don't have the sales volume. Against that, chances are that 80+ inches of 3D Smart TV, possibly even with a native 4K panel, might be on offer for no more than about £7,000. So my next projector upgrade will almost certainly be a TV ■

Is Richard right? Would an 80in screen be big enough for you? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Richard Stevenson also wants to buy a Smart TV just to use gesture control while dressed up like Tom Cruise in *Minority Report*.



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